

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET

stories

A.N.C.

FALL



25¢

With a song in their
hearts the celibates of
Mars relived . . .

THE GEISHA MEMORY



THE TIME-TECHS of KRA

A lost world novel by Max Sheridan

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 8

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

FALL, 1954

Book-length Novel of Distant Worlds

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The vast technical knowledge of eons, past and future, was held captive by the genius Kralons—giant insects that were seining the stream of Time for the truth that would make them unrivalled masters of the system.

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Where the fen-pen is supreme.

Cover Illustrations by Kelly Freas

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THE VIZIGRAPH

With an over-long letter parade coming up, and a tighter magazine, let's get right to the pic winners for the last issue. 1) Jean Mackintosh; 2) Don Wegars; 3) James Lewis.

READING MIT MITT

Sweet Springs,
Missouri

Dear Editor,

I venture to say that a number of PLANET'S readers will not be tremendously joyful over the return to quarterly publication. The cut-back has been severe, that is true. However I foresee no reason to assume that it is in its entirety a tragedy. A factual analysis is enough to convince almost any reasoning individual that we are in the process of a leveling off period made necessary by the immediate preceding period of over-production coupled with lack of advancement in numbers of consumers. Many "fly-by-night" publishers learned a hard lesson. In the process some relatively innocent publishers are going to feel the blow also. This is unavoidable. ALL progress is costly. It is well to remember that we still have an exceedingly large amount of SF magazines available, and that even during the most trying period of its existence, the War years, Science-Fiction survived.

It is necessary now to deal with JAMES P. CROW, by far the worst bit of fiction in your May issue and quite possibly one of the worst PS has ever published. An accurate estimate of the author's "skill" can be surmised from the fact that while he attempted to create sympathy with the human characters I unavoidably found myself hoping the robot element would emerge victorious. To be perfectly blunt, this story was thoroughly commercial and entirely unrecommendable. A hackish attempt at satirizing the Negro vs Caucasian dilemma. The ridiculousness of this fiction effort is heightened by the fact that although presumably set in the far future it features persons using 1934 SLANG. Of course "Crow" just happens to invent a time machine also . . . NUTS.

Only a shade less objectional was Alan E. Nourse's SIXTY YEAR EXTENSION, without any doubt the worst Nourse yarn I've ever encountered. For a while I could hardly believe that a writer of Nourse's stature could sink so low. Frankly I find it rather difficult to believe that because an individual's kidneys or other internal organs are replaced that he will necessarily turn his back on his wife, home and career. Furthermore I don't see any reason to assume that people will be smoking cigars in 2173 . . . or pipes. "The juke-box whined" . . . if any Juke Boxes exist by 2173 I will be greatly surprised . . . "the music tape sounded" perhaps . . . but NO "Juke Boxes" thank you.

SKELETONS OF SPACE was reasonably well done if a trifle improbable, especially that part about the insects going down the

throat of Tiege . . . a quick thrust into the mouth, an instant to swallow the food and I doubt if the insects would follow it down the digestive tract even if the individual eating would be foolish enough to leave his mouth gaping open. No need to starve. Of course it would be unpleasant learning to gulp food without chewing. Excellent illustration by Eberle.

LAND BEYOND THE FLAME was another of the PS brand bits of hokum enjoyable even though improbable. Evelyn Goldstein . . . Hmmm . . . I wonder . . . leave off "stein" and look what you've got. Very nice to have Vestal back if only for one illustration. THE PRIMUS CURSE is possibly the best in the issue, good character study with action. An old PLANET standby Erik Fennel makes a triumphant return with his "novel," an old Burrough's plot but I liked it. The idea of an aquatic existence fascinates me. Notable stories on this theme have been rendered by James Blish (under the pseudonym "Arthur Merlyn") in SUPER SCIENCE STORIES May 1942 and by C. H. Liddell (Pseudonym for Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore) in Nov. 1951 SCIENCE-FICTION QUARTERLY under the titles SUNKEN UNIVERSE and WE SHALL COME BACK. Lastly we come to HOYDONS AWEIGH which was neither very bad or very good. Groves is an English author, isn't he?

The blocked cover was a change. Hardly recognized PLANET. Freas is an able cover artist, but I'm afraid that John Fletcher errs when he states that Freas will become as popular as Finlay, (the inference being of course that Freas is Finlay's equal). He defeats his own case by admitting that "Freas makes his drawings clear-out. Finlay uses thousands of tiny lines to achieve his effect." Only too true, you see Finlay is a craftsman who knows about things like background and proper shading, all of which require infinite care and patience to ingrain within an illustration. A "clear-cut" drawing with simple lines is always easier to do.

Let me give you a warning John, do NOT laugh at this Keogh person. You are courting disaster. Make him mad and he will produce so many "letters to the editor" that you and I will never, nay never get another printed. I can see him seated before his typer cackling in fiendish glee. "Ha' . . . my Six thousandth and forty-fifth letter to PLANET commenting on this issue . . . tamper with I . . . THE Keogh will they . . . I'll teach 'em" (Keogh is a distant relative of that old and evil professor . . . the one in the T. P. Caravan stories).

Well greetings there Uncle Bill Tuning . . . been a long time since la Viz brought us some of your stirring philosophy anent the Cosmic All . . . favor us with another huh?

Conductorly,

PAUL MITTELBUSCHER

SANS SEX

411 Mayfair Ave.,
Ottawa, Ont.

Dear Mr. Editor,

What is all this commotion and fuss? Why all these diatribes and paeans concerning our ancient and ubiquitous acquaintance, namely:

SEX

We have those who say it's sin, and
Those who greet it with a grin, and
Those who scribble tracts to propagate its fame.
We have those who say it's holy,

Those to whom it's "duty" solely,
And those to whom it is a dirty shame.
There are those to whom it's clinical,
Those whose attitudes are finical,
Those who are So Very Cynical
(But Free)
There are those who don't believe it,
Those who never want to leave it,
Those who simply can't conceive it
. . . And there's Me.

I am indescribably sorry to have inflicted my attempts at versification upon the suffering Ed, but it was unavoidable. (Of course, it wasn't, but I intend to stick to my claim that it was.)

In the midst of the arm-waving, the accusations, the imprecations, I stand apart from the mad mob and smile condescendingly upon the pathetic sincerity and agitation of the gladiators. For, first of all, I cheerfully disagree with those myriad thousands who, since the time of the fabled Adam, have proclaimed regularly and Very Profoundly that "Sex is here to stay."

Phoo is what I (personally) say—just plain phoo! Sex is not "here to stay." I would add "definitely," except for the fact that I believe nothing to be definite. However, Sex will be replaced by a superior method of reproduction; either that, or else a need for reproduction will not exist. In either case, Sex will vanish. (Oh, no, not this week . . . go ahead and finish that novellette. It'll sell for a while yet.)

Why will Sex vanish, I hear nobody asking. Well, it is too unsatisfactory a method of propagating a species, and Nature has constantly gone about her business of improving upon, and eliminating, unsatisfactory methods. Sex is unsatisfactory for quite a number of reasons, among which are (1) wrong mating will often produce deformed offspring (2) the carrying about of the unborn young by the mother is dangerous, awkward and primitive (3) the sex urge is the prime cause of mental instability in a supposedly sentient species.

We may guess at a future evolution of the reproductive process, but the concept is almost as inconceivable to us as bisexuality would be to a thoughtful unicellular animal, granting that such an animal could be thoughtful. Oh well, this could go on for volumes. Sufficient to say that Sex is not the ultimate.

As to morals, etc., well, anyone of reasonable sexual attractiveness (sexual attractiveness is reasonable) can eventually find a kindred spirit if diligent application be made to the search. Thus, lechers can find lechers, or is it lecheresses? Prudes can discover prudes. All the various other types can find their counterparts. So where is the problem?


A—hem! The problem is that people, as a rule, will not acknowledge to themselves their own particular sex desires . . . ooooo! Another subject. Let's drop the subject right now. One—two—three—drop!

I will take the large, crude old pulps anytime. I have got a bellyful of suave little semi-slicks, which wallow in innuocuity (or maybe innocuousness . . . but you know what I mean. Don't you?) I have another theory about this New Literature trend in s-f, but That Is Another Stro (Stro?) Story. And a very dull one, at that. I may write it one of these days, and let PLANET give it to the world. PLANET should live so long.

Give pics to anybody but Keogh. He is a fanatic and a crackpot and he should stay on the back page which he has tagged with the label of the Slush-Heap. Or if he didn't, he should have, but I will, if

(Continued on page 55)





*With a song in their hearts
the celibates of Mars gaily
relived—*

THE GEISHA MEMORY

By WINSTON MARKS

PETER DUNCAN lay strapped, drugged and supine on one of the eighty narrow bucket-couches on the passenger deck and was miserably, continuously sick. It was not a nice steady nausea that a man could adjust to. Nor even a rhythmic vertigo like one suffered from an ocean liner wallowing in ground swells. It was a shifting, sliding instability in three dimensions, as the Mars-bound vessel responded to automatic radar controls.

The concept of interplanetary space being empty was long since an exploded myth Duncan was reminded as the space ship veered, accelerated, decelerated and corrected course to avoid collision with meteorites approaching from thousands of miles away.

That seventy-nine other passengers and the whole crew were suffering as much as he, was little comfort. They, at least, had a substantial reason for being here. Aside from the money, in which Duncan, too, shared, these others were vital players in an enormous game, supplying energy-starved earth with fissionable materials from the inexhaustible mines of Mars.

The single ship was the only link between the two planets, and it represented earth's greatest extravagance in history. The passengers, replacements for eighty mine workers who had served their four years and 100 days contract time, provided the essential manpower. For them it was important work and brought them not only the \$100,000 contract fee, but also membership in the highly honored and exclu-

sive fellowship of the Mars Society. Back on earth they were assured a life-long position of fame and wealth. To facilitate the recruiting of future crews, public relations man, Peter Duncan, was to see to it that romance and glamour surrounded the Mars Society with honor bright and a yard wide.

And it wasn't easy. The rigors of the round trip, alone, were no secret on earth. After thirty years operation, most visions of romance in space flight had been dissipated by the grim details of the stomach-wrenching journey.

Duncan was new to the job. And too young for the job, he had thought. But now the joker was apparent. Senior publicity men in the employ of General Fission enjoyed the high pay and conventional public relations work with their feet comfortably secure on earth. But G. F. needed a 25-year-old for this assignment that broke all precedents. Experience came only with age. And age was the disqualifier for space ship travel. It was not his Phi Beta Kappa key his employers admired, but his youthful circulatory system, his sturdy, compact skeletal structure and above all his emotional stability quotient.

And the world-shaking assignment for this proud package of manhood was to track down the meaning and implications of a song. A song that had seeped out of the bistros and night clubs of earth, a song that could have no other origin than returned space miners. There were endless verses to it, but the last lines were always similar. Several stanzas ran through Duncan's brain to the tune of the ancient patriotic ballad, *America The Beautiful*.

Farewell to Mars
And frigid stars
That light the rusty sands!
My one regret:
I'll not forget
Those ever-loving hands.

My stint is done,
My fortune's won.
Break out the earthling bands!
I'm glad to go,
But yet I know
I'll miss those loving hands.

To breathe again
Like other men
And aerate my glands—
For this, farewell
To all that's hell—
Except those loving hands.

"WE WANT to know," Duncan had been told, "what the devil is going on out there!"

"Why not cross-examine the returned miners?" Duncan had asked. The answer was simple. They wouldn't talk. There appeared to be a conspiracy to keep secret the significance of the song's suggestive last lines.

Never had a taint of immorality touched the Mars operation. When the first party of young women were included in the crew ten years ago, eyebrows had been raised. But subsequent returnees had given no cause for the slightest whisper of impropriety.

They couldn't afford to.

The rules were hard and uncompromising. On Mars, no female member of the company was allowed to associate with any male except in working hours and within the strictest limitations of her official duty. Twenty women and one hundred forty men lived in complete segregation. Violation of this rule imposed a \$10,000 fine on each of the violators.

When Duncan had asked the obvious question he learned the fantastic truth: In spite of General Fission's world-wide recruiting campaign, they couldn't fill their quota of 80 men for the half shift change every other year. After the physical examinations reduced the thousands of applicants to a few hundred, the emotional tests took their toll. Of the remainder, 10 berths always remained open—the housekeeping, supply and medical care jobs went begging. Women were the only answer.

It was not difficult to recruit suitable female candidates for the 20 berths. The complications came with the problem of a mixed crew in isolation for over four years. Marriages would be inevitable if allowed. But in Mars' reduced atmospheric pressure pregnancy would be fatal to mother and child. Hence, the segregation rule.

Until the song reached Earth, all had gone well. Young people selected for their emotional stability seemed able to withstand the terrible loneliness. But now—the song. And the whisperings that were threatening to disrupt the whole recruiting campaign. These young people were subject to the

influences of their parents, churches and sweethearts. Even this tenuous wisp of smoke might indicate fire. And if the verses of the song became one shade more ribald, G. F. would whistle for qualified applicants. A wide open scandal could wreck the whole enlistment program.

Back on earth the problem had presented Duncan with a provocative challenge. Now, 20 days out, with 42 days travel ahead, his thoughts were wrapping into a tight spiral of resentment. His imagination had run the gamut of every possible situation he might find, each more lurid and revolting than the last. He cursed man's lustful nature that made this whole mission necessary, and in particular he blamed the Mars colony for the physical discomfort he was being forced to endure. What kind of medal might they award him for spying on a herd of billy-goats and weak-willed nannies?

A buzzer vibrated under his arm. It was his turn for exercise. Warily he unfastened the webbing that strapped him to the g-couch and hauled his way forward to the tiny physical therapy chamber. They were in so-called free flight, but the lurches required that he hold fast to the padded rail and move hand-over-hand.

There would be the tension exercises, then a "shower" with a damp towel. Then meal time. He made a face at the thought. So far he had been able to eat fewer than a dozen meals orally. His arms already were becoming freckled with scars from the intravenous feedings and anti-vertigo injections.

TO HIS considerable surprise he was able to step through the air-lock and descend the steep, cleated ramp to the surface of Mars under his own power. The setting sun was a tiny, hot eye burning across the reddish orange plains. A light breeze refreshed his face after the rank humidity of the space ship. But the mask through which he breathed and the oxygen bottle on his back reminded him it was an unfriendly wind, the movement of a thin ocean of nitrogen in which a man could drown within minutes. He sucked gratefully at the low-pressure oxygen, and in silence shuffled after their guide.

Gravity was only a third of earth's. After

weeks of free-fall and the last hours of heavy deceleration, the replacements stumbled drunkenly seeking their land legs. A half mile from the ship the lights of the mine and lesser glow from the settlement alongside guided their course. As they neared the village he could make out a sprawl of squat, box-like buildings of a dull, silvery finish. They were the thin-walled, magnesium alloy structures in which Duncan would sleep, eat and spy until the next ship-landing.

Behind him the holds were gasping open and beginning to disgorge the massive supply cargo that must keep 160 souls alive for 780 terrestrial days. Fragile appearing trucks rumbled out and passed the group. A pair of spindly cranes that could barely have supported their own weight on earth, jounced behind tiny jeep-like tow-cars.

Now the sun was below distant low hills. Duncan noted the suddenness of the sunset, and as he looked, Phobos, the nearer moon rose out of the west, a huge crescent like the stage moons on earth. Only 3700 miles from Mars' surface, it would race overhead in the space of minutes. Even in the dark, its progress could be followed by the disk of blackness against the stars. Now the crescent lay horizontal and narrow, but even as he watched, the sliver fattened and separated itself from the low mountain range.

The new group was waved into the largest building, through a double entrance of curtains. Inside was air. Everyone was removing his mask. Evidently this was the recreation room. A small stage at one end held a man and ten women.

When they were all seated in the rows of chairs, the man on the rostrum arose and spoke. "Fellow PhD's and fatheads, may I welcome you to your new home for the next," he looked at his wrist watch, "781 days, six hours and 18 minutes." He was short, blond, powerfully built and pleasant of face. A rather pale, symmetrical blotch of skin containing his mouth, nose and part of each cheek, was outlined by his heavily sunburned complexion. That would be the shadow of his oxygen mask, Duncan surmised. "My name is Lee Bowen, your newly elected spokesman," he went on. "My chief qualification is the biggest mouth

and the loudest voice on Mars. Before you leave you will have two elections in which to vote, but until the next ship comes you'll have to put up with me. And the girls here." He waved forward one of the slack-suited females. Like the others she looked intelligent, but her closely cropped brown hair and loose-fitting clothes almost concealed her sex. Her face was pretty but seemed pale without make-up. "Discretion is the better part of pallor," Duncan punned to himself.

"Dr. Martha Rice is spokesman for the ladies." Bowen bowed briefly and stepped back.

The girl smiled and looked them over thoughtfully. "We have problems here. I would like to emphasize a couple of them. Please don't cut yourself, shaving or working. The slightest wound in our low atmospheric pressure requires a compress bandage. They are nuisances. A modestly deep gash can cost you your life."

She paused and studied them some more. "And so I hope you are all careful or at least thick-skinned. For another reason, too. Our second problem here is the high price of love." The nine girls behind her laughed as she looked back at them, but her face became serious.

"You were led to believe that a kiss would cost you only \$10,000.00. Well, you were misled. The price is \$20,000, and the market is wide open. Any one of us will accommodate you, but you'll have to pay our fine as well as your own."

Duncan gasped at her first words, then, as they sank in, he smiled. Morale, good. Morals, even better if this wasn't just an act. Applause was enthusiastic, but there were no whistles.

Bowen came up again as the girl sat down. "Remember that, gentlemen. You came up here to earn a tenth of a million dollars. Believe me, you'll earn it. But don't kiss it away. It's only worth five kisses up here, and these girls will put you on report if you lay a finger on them. If they don't, they go on report."

THE first two days were spent unloading supply cargo and stowing it. The outgoing passengers took care of loading the stockpile of concentrated minerals, so Dun-

can had no chance to talk with them. On the third morning the ship was launched. The bustle of activity died, and Duncan moved into the smooth mining routine like the polished cog that he was.

Personnel training was done on earth. All were preassigned to their tasks, so the old crews had only to point. The mining operations went on as if no replacements had been made. The men's work was roughly divided into outside and inside work. Duncan's inside specialty was feeding samples to a spectrograph and assisting the nuclear chemist in charge of the lab. On alternate days he took his turn in the field tending excavating equipment.

Since the mine was located near the equator, this alternation of the whole crew was necessary to reduce exposure to the miniature sun that provided so little useful heat, yet whose ultra-violet pierced the cloudless, thin atmosphere with vicious intensity.

No one went hungry, but as the weeks passed the seeming variety of food rations disappeared. The monotony of dehydrated vegetables and meats palled. But worst was the silence. For ten hours each day almost no communication passed among the workers. All breathable oxygen had to be extracted from the oxides of minerals, and the by-product oxygen from the mining operation was barely enough to supply the total demands of their masks. So even the inside working areas were left to Mars' unbreathable gases, and masks could be removed only in off-duty quarters.

Chief occupations in off-hours were games of chess, reading, writing and activities that used a minimum of conversation. No one felt like talking much after a full shift of sucking hard at oxygen to keep up with his body's demand. Although the lessened gravity appeared to make all physical labor easy, Duncan could never remember such complete fatigue at the end of a working day. He ate, worked, played chess and slept 10 hours a day.

The women replacements had disappeared into their compound and were seen no more. He wondered at the type of indoctrination they were getting. Did it include an item concerning the use of *loving hands*? Strangely, the men made no reference to the women, and he was reluctant

to draw attention by broaching the subject.

The living quarters, mess-hall and recreation spaces were grouped intimately, but placed in such a manner that windows and entries allowed no casual glimpses of the women from the men's areas. Complete security in the matter of segregation appeared to be guaranteed on the honor system alone. All 140 men slept in one long bunk-room, all 20 women in another.

Intelligent men are not easily bored, but Peter Duncan discovered a certain restlessness developing among the new men during the fourth month. There was a tendency to break off in the middle of a chess game, or to speak tersely. Duncan ascribed this to a phase of adjustment, because the second term crew seemed better tempered.

Then it began to bother *him*. He found himself developing an unreasoning impatience. He began using profanity at slight annoyances. The stiff soreness of chest, neck and back muscles became chronic, and he began laying awake listening to his own rapid breathing, begrudging every inhalation of his overworked lungs. The devil with expense! Why didn't they at least pressurize the sleeping quarters so a man could get some decent rest?

He recognized the symptoms of increasing irritability in himself as it distracted him even during his work. But he couldn't put his finger on the cause. It grew worse. During the twelfth month he reached a stage of exasperation that almost cost him his life.

He was tightening a bolt on one of the spindles. The second time his wrench slipped off the nut he squared away and threw the spanner at the horizon. Too late he saw his crew-mate, geologist Magnus Porter. Horrified he watched the wrench arc three times as far as it would have on earth, and strike Porter in the face. He went down.

When Duncan reached him the scientist's face was gushing blood, and his smashed mask hissed its charge into the sterile air. Fortunately, they were on the camp side of the pits, only two hundred yards from sickbay. Porter weighed no more than a blanket roll, and the odds seemed good at first. But before Duncan had bounded half the distance his lungs pumped to the burst-

ing point. His vision dimmed, and his legs faltered. He tore off his mask, pressed it to Porter's face, gulped a chest full of dead air and screamed for help.

RED streaks of pain tore through his head, down his neck muscles and into his chest. The slightest breathing movements racked his lungs, but, incredibly, they sucked in rich, sweet oxygen, heavy and dense.

He knew he must be in a compression tank. The whispering pump and muffled sound of voices outside were evidence enough, although he couldn't open his eyes.

The mists cleared quickly now, and the voices formed words. He recognized Martha Rice's voice. "—anoxia. I can't determine how severe. Have to wait and see. He may be all right when he gets over the headache. Then again there may be permanent brain damage."

Duncan hurt too much to care. He passed out again. When he regained consciousness he realized the pressure was reduced, for his lungs were pumping hard again. Then the coffin clanked apart, the sides dropped and he was trying to focus on the ring of female faces that surrounded him.

"Hiya, Mister?" Martha's face settled down to a recognizable fuzz-ball.

His head was clear now, but his throat was too tight to consider speaking. He stared back blankly. The physician shook her head, misunderstanding his failure to respond. A nurse rigged an intravenous bottle, and they left him to his thoughts. He slept again, restlessly this time. He dreamed of the accident, the wrench floating with terrible slowness toward Porter. Abruptly, he was back on earth. His mother was rubbing his neck and shoulders. Her hands were soft and reassuring. They kneaded down over his pectoral muscles and massaged his whole chest. But how did his mother know his chest hurt. You don't hurt your chest playing tennis. But his chest did hurt, and the firm, supple hands brought it warmth and life. His mother understood—

His eyes flipped open, and he stared into the inverted face of a nurse, stubby blonde curls bobbing crazily as her body swayed over him. "He's up," she said aloud.

Dr. Martha Rice moved into view. "I'll take over. Save yourself for tonight, Muriel. It's getting rougher."

The physician's hands replaced the nurse's, but the gentle, rhythmic touch was the same. Duncan relaxed in an orgy of tactile ecstasy.

"You are Peter Duncan. Do you understand?" she asked. He blinked, and she took that for affirmation. "In fact," she continued, "you are now Hero Peter Duncan."

This didn't register right. Hero? They must have saved Porter's life, but they didn't realize how it happened. And now she was misconstruing his puzzled expression. "I am Dr. Martha Rice. Remember me?"

All Duncan could think of now was the hands. *Loving hands*. What was the right answer? If he answered wrong the hands would stop. He closed his eyes. *Loving hands*. He remembered his mission.

How could he have better arranged it? This was ideal. By feigning slow recovery he could—

The hands stopped. A finger peeled back an eyelid. "You are awake. Come to, mister!"

Duncan opened the other eye and stared at her and let his lips part. "Thuh!" he grunted.

IT WAS night. Duncan was detached from the intravenous needle and tube, and a small compress bandage covered the throbbing vein where his blood had boiled out when the needle was withdrawn. He had decided to reveal enough recovery to take oral nourishment.

The wall chronometer, adjusted to the slightly longer Mars' day, read 2300, an hour before midnight. He was alone. It should have been quiet, but several times heavy footsteps had passed down the hall near his tiny room. The sick bay was attached to the women's quarters.

Distinctly he heard an outside door open and the clump of safety boots passed his room. Slipping off the high bed he opened his door and looked into the hall. It was a man. Even in the dim light there was no mistaking the broad physique.

Duncan whipped a sheet around his nude

body and followed a few yards to where the visitor had disappeared through a curtained arch. Before the curtains stopped swaying he saw the outlines of cots within. It was the women's sleeping room! His stomach turned cold.

So the legend of the song was based on fact. And his trip out here was justified after all. And what now, after he had uncovered the mess with his own eyes?

He approached the curtains uncertainly. A sob from within startled him. It was a man's cry. A girl's voice said something softly reassuring, and all was still again.

Duncan lurched through the arch and stood rooted. The denunciation died in his throat. Twenty single bunks were spaced around the walls. Each was occupied, but only three girls were asleep. The rest were sitting on the edge with their feet on the floor. At each girl's feet with his back resting against her legs was a member of the male company. The pale light of Deimos, Mars' second moon, shone through the overhead panes to reveal the secret of the loving hands.

Duncan watched seventeen pairs of arms encircling the necks of as many men, hands reaching down under loose jackets to massage aching chests and rising to knead gently on tired shoulder muscles. Fingers strayed tenderly over masculine foreheads and necks with unmistakable caressing motions.

The prone figure near him stirred, and a sleepy face looked up at him. "Oh, my gosh, it's Duncan!" she said. It was Martha Rice. She slipped from the blankets and drew him over to her bunk. "Sit down," she invited.

Stunned, Duncan lowered himself to the edge of the bed. "No, not there! Down, boy! On the deck," she pointed. "The fellows would get the wrong idea, patient or no patient."

Duncan complied, leaning against her warm legs as the others were doing. She sighed, yawned audibly, and began the massaging routine. With the touch of her hands the confusion left Duncan's tortured mind. Propaganda, morality arguments, missions into space and the importance of \$10,000 fines disappeared. This was real. A woman's heart reaching out through her

hands to comfort her man. It was physical, but it transcended the physical. It justified the rigid segregation rules even as it glorified them and violated them.

The need of man for woman was too great for any barrier. And no woman could refuse giving of herself when the need was desperate enough.

Three more men came through the curtains.

Two found girls, but the third stood hesitantly. A girl on the next bunk from Duncan and Martha, rubbed her man's head briskly and said quietly, "Good night, mister. Got another customer. See you soon." She waved in the new man as the other heaved reluctantly to his feet. "Good night, honey," he said simply and left.

Men stepped over Duncan's legs coming and going, without remark, without greeting.

Almost no conversation took place. A whispered good night or a soft word of comfort, and then minutes of silence except for the rustle of deep sighing breathing.

Then Martha's hands stopped. She pulled him to his feet and led him toward the arch. Instantly several girls' heads turned toward them. "Want help, Doctor?" one asked almost sharply.

"No thanks, Claire. This boy's sick."

She led him back to his room. He turned his back to the bed as though to sit down, but instead he moved to her. She slid into his arms as though it were rehearsed, and he crushed her close to him. Through their light garments he felt her body strain for a brief moment then completely relax. She peeled away from his lips.

"Mister, that will cost you just \$10,000. You're on report!"

The shock of her voice was a cold plunge back to another reality. Duncan's hands fell to his sides and he sat down heavily, head bowed. Martha lifted his legs, untwined the sheet and tucked in the blankets. Suddenly she dropped to him and pressed her face to his. "You poor devil! You poor, poor, devil!" Her tears rolled down to his face, and she cried unrestrainedly for more than a minute. Duncan kept his hands at his sides, and it was his greatest triumph of self-control.

HE GAVE himself two days to affect recovery. On the second morning he called for Dr. Martha Rice. She came in alone, her darkly handsome face inscrutable. "You are better, I hear. For exactly how long have you been feeling better?"

Duncan smiled. "Long enough to want to get out of here. How is Magnus Porter?"

"He left an hour ago. He'll wear a bandage for a week, but your mask saved him from anything serious. That was quite a gesture, my boy. As I mentioned the other night, you are on report—"

Duncan winced.

"—for a citation for heroism beyond the call of duty."

"You're quite a girl, yourself," Duncan said. "Where are my pants? I have some ore to get out before the next ship. We mustn't return short of cargo, must we?"

"What do you mean, *we*? You have a term and a half to complete," she said.

"I'm here on a special assignment, and we'll be going out together on the next ship."

"I will, but you—you! What kind of special assignment?"

"Some fuddy-dufs down sunward had some foolish ideas about reducing the crew out here by some twenty persons. You know, trying to save money. I'm to report upon your dispensability. I will be pleased to report that the women's contingent is completely and magnificently indispensable to General Fission. Which reminds me, will you have dinner with me when we get home?"

Martha was somewhat paler. She leaned against the door. "And I put *you* on report!"

"Answer my question, girl, and hand me my pants."

"Your question? Oh. Yes. Yes, of course, I'll have dinner with you. Here are your pants."

"And breakfast and lunch?"

"Is this a proposal?"

"Proposals on Mars violate our contract. So do propositions, so let's just call it a date."

"Date?" Martha fondled the word that sounded so alien and lovely. She smiled. "All right, Peter, it's a date."



Illustrated by Kelly Freas

JUPITER'S JOKE

By A. L. HALEY

Casey Ritter, the guy who never turned down a dare, breathed a prayer to the gods of idiots and spacemen, and headed in toward the great red spot of terrible Jupiter.

THOSE methane and ammonia planets, take it from me, they're the dead-end of creation, and why the Old Man ever thought them up I'll never know. I never thought I'd mess around any of them, but things can sure happen. A man can get himself backed into a corner in this little old solar system. It just ain't big enough for a

gent of scope and talent; and the day the Solar System Customs caught me red-handed smuggling Kooleen crystals in from Mars, I knew I was in that corner, and sewed up tight.

Sure, the crystals are deadly, but I was smuggling them legitimately, in a manner of speaking, for this doctor to experiment



with. He wasn't going to sell them for dope. But—and this was the 'but' that was likely to deprive the System of my activities—even experimenting with them was illegal even if it needed to be done; also, I had promised not to rat on him before taking the job.

Well, Casey Ritter may be a lot of things we won't mention, but he doesn't rat on his clients. So there I was, closeted with the ten members of the S. S. Customs Court, getting set to hear the gavel fall and the head man intone the sentence that would

take me out of circulation for a long, long time. And instead, blast me, if they didn't foul me with this trip to good old Jupiter.

I didn't get it at first. I'd argued with 'em, but inside I'd been all set for the sentence, and even sort of reconciled to it. I could even hear the words in my mind. But they didn't match what the judge was saying. I stood there gaping like a beached fish while I sorted it out. Then I croaked, "Jupiter! What for? Are you running outa space in stir? Want to choke me to death

in chlorine instead?" Being civil to the court didn't seem important just then. Jupiter was worse than the pen, a lot worse. Jupiter was a death sentence.

The senior judge rapped sharply with his gavel. He frowned me down and then nodded at the judge on his right. This bird, a little old hank of dried-up straw, joined his fingertips carefully, cleared his scrawny throat, and told me what for.

"You've no doubt heard tales of the strange population of Jupiter," he said. "Every spaceman has, I am sure. Insect-like creatures who manifestly migrated there from some other system and who inhabit the Red Spot of the planet, floating in some kind of artificial anti-gravity field in the gaseous portion of the atmosphere—"

I snorted. "Aw, hell, judge, that's just one of those screwy fairy tales! How could any—"

The senior judge rapped ferociously, and I skidded to a halt. Our little story teller patiently cleared his skinny throat again. "I assure you it is no fairy tale. We possess well-authenticated photographs of these inhabitants, and if you are prepared to visit them and in some way worm from them the secret of their anti-gravity field, the government stands ready to issue you a full pardon as well as a substantial monetary reward. Your talents, Mr. Ritter, seem, shall we say, eminently suited to the task."

HE BEAMED at me. I looked around. They were all beaming. At me! Suddenly I smelled a rat as big as an elephant. That whole Kooleen caper: Had it been just a trap to lead me straight to this? I hadn't been able to figure how they'd cracked my setup. . . .

At the thought my larynx froze up tight. This was worse than I'd thought. Government men trapping me and then beaming at me. And a full pardon. And a reward. Oh, no! I told myself, it wasn't possible. Not when I already had more counts against me than a cur has fleas. Not unless it was a straight suicide mission!

I feebly massaged my throat. "Pictures?" I whispered. "Show me 'em." Crude, but it was all I could squeeze out.

I squeezed out more when I saw those pictures, though. Those inhabitants were

charming, just charming if you like scorpions. Well, a cross between a scorpion and a grasshopper, to be accurate. Floating among that red stuff, they showed up a kind of sickly purple turning to gangrene around the edges.

The bleat of anguish that accompanied my first view of those beauties had taken my voice again. "How big?" I whispered.

He shrugged, trying for nonchalance. "About the size of a man, I believe."

I raised my shrinking head. "Take me to jail!" I said firmly, and collapsed onto my chair.

A crafty-eyed buzzard across the table leaned toward me. "So this is the great Casey Ritter, daredevil of the Solar System!" he sneered. "Never loses a bet, never turns down a dare!"

I shuddered. "You're telling that one! And besides, a man's got to draw the line somewhere. And I'm drawing it right here. Take me to jail!"

They were really stumped. They hadn't expected me to take this attitude at all. No doubt they had it figured that I'd gratefully throw myself into a sea of ammonia among man-size scorpions just for the hell of it. Nuts! After all, in the pen a man can eat and breathe, and a guard won't reach in and nip off an arm or leg while he's got his back turned. How stupid could they get?

When I finally wore them down and got to my little cell, I looked around it with a feeling of real coziness. I even patted the walls chummily and snapped a salute at the guard. It makes me grind my molars now to think of it. The way that bunch of stuffed shirts in the S. S. C. made a gold-barred chimpanzee out of me has broken my spirit and turned me into an honest trader. Me, Casey Ritter, slickest slicker in the Solar System, led like a precious infant right where I'd flatly refused to go! In plain English, I underestimated the enemy. Feeling safe and secure in the grip of the good old Iron College, I relaxed.

At this strategic point, the enemy planted a stoolie on me. Not in my cell block. They were too smart for that. But we met at recreation, and his mug seemed familiar, like a wisp of smoke where no smoke has got a right to be; and after awhile I braced him.

I was right. I'd met the shrimp before when I was wound up in an asteroid real estate racket. Pard Hoskins was his alias, and he had the tag of being a real slick operator. We swapped yarns for about a week when we met, and then I asked him what's his rap this trip.

"Oh, a pretty good jolt if they can keep hold of me," he says. "I just made a pass at the Killicut Emeralds, that's all, and got nabbed."

"Oh, no!" I moaned. "What were you trying to do, start a feud between us and Mars?"

He shrugged, but his little black-currant eyes began to sparkle with real passion, the high voltage kind that only a woman in a million, or a million in a bank, can kindle in a guy. "Buddy," he said reverently, "I'd start more than that just to get me mitts on them stones again! Why, you ain't never seen jools till you've seen them! Big as hen's eggs, an even dozen of 'em; and flawless, I'm a-shoutin', not a flaw!" His eyes watered at the memory, yearning like a hound-dog's over a fresh scent.

I couldn't believe it. Those emeralds were in the inner shrine of the super-sacred, super-secret temple of the cavern-dwelling tribe of Killicuts on Mars—the real aborigines. Bleachies, we call them, sort of contemptuously; but those Bleachies are a rough lot when they're mad, and if Pard had really got near those emeralds, he should be nothing but a heap of cleaned bones by now. Either he was the world's champion liar or its bravest son, and either way I took my hat off to him.

"How'd you make the getaway?" I asked, taking him at his word.

He looked loftily past me. "Sorry. Gotta keep that a secret. Likewise where I cached 'em."

"Cached what?"

"The rocks, stupe."

I hardly heard the cut. "You mean you really did get away with them?" My jaw must've been hanging down a foot, because I'd just been playing along with him, not really believing him, and now all of a sudden I somehow knew that he'd really lifted those emeralds. But how? It was impossible. I'd investigated once myself.

He nodded and then moved casually

away. I looked up and saw a guard coming.

That night I turned on my hard prison cot until my bones were so much jelly, trying to figure that steal. The next morning I got up burning with this fever for information, only to find that Pard had got himself put in solitary for mugging a guard, and that really put the heat on me. I chewed my fingernails down to the quick by the time he got out a week later.

BY THAT time he really had me hooked. I'd of sworn he was levelin' with me. But he wouldn't tell me how he'd worked the steal. Instead, he opened up on the trade he'd booked for the string. He said, "When I chisel me way outa this squirrel cage, I'm gonna hit fer good old Jupe and sell 'em to Akroida. She's nuts about jools. What that old girl won't give me fer 'em—" He whistled appreciatively, thinking about it.

"Jupiter!" I goggled at him. "Akroida! Who's she?"

He looked at me as if I hadn't yet got out from under the rock where he was sure I'd been born. "Don't you know nothin', butterhead?"

From him I took it. I even waited patiently till the master spoke again. The memory still makes me fry.

"Akroida," he explained in his own sweet time, "is the queen-scorp of them idiotic scorpions that lives on Jupiter. I sold her the Halcyon Diamond that disappeared from the World Museum five years ago, remember?" He winked broadly. "It come from Mars in the first place, you know. Mars! What a place fer jools! Damn desert's lousy with 'em, if it wasn't so much trouble to dig 'em out—" He went off into a dream about the rocks on Mars but I jerked him back.

"You mean those scorpions have really got brains?"

"Brains!" he snorted. "Have they got brains! Why, they're smarter than people! And not ferocious, neither, in spite of how they look, if you just leave 'em alone. That's all they want, just to be left alone. Peace an' quiet, and lots of methane and ammonia and arsenic, that's fer them. Besides, the space suit rig you got to wear, they can't bite you. Akroida's not a bad old girl. Partial to arsenic on her lettuce, so I

brought her a hundred pounds of the stuff, an' she went fer that almost like it was diamonds, too. Did I rate around there fer awhile!" He sighed regretfully. "But then I went and made her mad, an' I'm kinda persona non grata there right now. By the time I gnaw outa this here cheese trap, though, I figger she'll be all cooled off and ready fer them emeralds."

I went back to my cot that night, and this time instead of biting my nails, I bit myself. So I faced it, Casey Ritter lost his nerve, and along with it, the chance of a lifetime. A better man than me had already penetrated the Great Red Spot of old Jupiter and come out alive. That thought ate me to the quick, and I began to wonder if it was too late, after all, I could hardly wait for morning to come, so that I could pry more information out of Pard Hoskins.

But I didn't see Pard for a few days. And then, a week later, a group of lifers made a break that didn't jell, and the whole bunch was locked up in the blockhouse, the special building reserved for escapees. Pard Hoskins was in the bunch. He'd never get out of there, and he knew it. So did I.

For three more days I worked down my knuckles, my nails being gone, while I sat around all hunched up, wondering feverishly if Pard would make a deal about those emeralds. Then I broke down and sent out a letter to the S. S. C.

The Big Sneer of the conference table promptly dropped in on me, friendly as a bottle of strychnine. But for a lad headed for Jupiter that was good training, so I sneered right back at him, explained the caper, and we both paid a visit to Pard. In two days the deal was made and the caper set up. There were a few bits of info that Pard had to shell out, like where the emeralds were, and how to communicate with those scorpions, and how he'd made Akroida mad.

"I put on a yellin' slicker," he confessed sadly. "That there ammonia mist was eatin' into the finish on my spacesuit, so I draped this here slicker around me to sorta fancy up the rig before goin' in to an audience with the old rip." He shook his head slowly. "The kid that took me in was colorblind, so I didn't have no warning at all. I found out that them scorpions can't stand yellin'.

It just plain drives them nuts! Thought they'd chaw me up and spit me out into the chlorine before I could get outa the damn thing. If my colorblind pal hadn't helped me, they'd of done it, too. And Akroida claimed I done it a-purpose to upset her."

Then he winked at me. "But then I got off in a corner and cooked up some perfume that drives them nuts the other way; sorta frantic with ecstasy, like the book says. Didn't have a chance to try it on Arkoida, though. She wouldn't give me another audience. It's in the stuff they cleaned outa me room: a poiple bottle with a bright green stopper."

He ruminated a few minutes. "Tell you what, chump. Make them shell out with a green an' poiple spacesuit—their's the real Jupiter colors—an' put just a touch o' that there perfume on the outside of it. Akroida'll do anything fer you if she just gets a whiff. Just anything! But remember, don't use but a drop. It's real powerful."

II

REAL powerful, said the man. What an understatement! But the day I was set adrift in that sea of frozen ammonia clouds mixed with nice cozy methane gas I sure prayed for it to be powerful, and I clutched that tiny bottle like that boy Aladdin clutching his little old lamp.

I'd had a lot of cooperation getting that far. An Earth patrol had slipped down onto the Red Desert of Mars and picked up the Killicut Emeralds from where Pard Hoskins had cached them; and safe out in space again, we had pored over that string of green headlights practically slobbering. But the Big Sneer of the S. S. C., the fellow that had got me into this caper, was right there to take the joy out of it all and to remind me that this was public service, strictly.

"These—" he had proclaimed with a disdainful flourish, like a placer miner pointing to a batch of fool's gold—"These jewels are as nothing, Ritter, compared with the value of the secret you are to buy with them. And be assured that if you're man enough to effect the trade—" He paused, his long nose twitching cynically—"If you

succeed, your reward will be triple what you could get for them in any market. Added to which, IF you succeed, you will be a free man."

That twitch of the nose riled me no little. "I ain't failed yet!" I snarled at him. "Just you wait till I do, feller!" I slipped the string of emeralds back into its little safe. "Instead of sniping at me, why don't you get that brain busy and set our rendezvous?"

With that we got down to business and fixed a meeting point out on Jupiter's farthest moon; then they took me in to the edge of Jupiter's ice-cloud and turned me loose in a peanut of a space boat with old Jupe looming ahead bigger than all outdoors and the Red Spot dead ahead. I patted my pretty enameled suit, which was a study in paris green and passionate purple.

I patted the three hundred pounds of arsenic crystals for Akroida and anyone else I might have to bribe. I anxiously examined my suit's air and water containers and the heating unit that would keep them in their proper state. I had already gone over the space boat. Yeah, I was as nervous as a cat with new kittens. Feeling again for my little bottle of horrid stench, I breathed a prayer to the god of idiots and spacemen, and headed in. The big ship was long gone, and I felt like a mighty small and naked microbe diving into the Pacific Ocean.

That famous Red Spot was that big, too. It kept expanding until the whole universe was a fierce, raw luminous red. Out beyond it at first there had been fringes of snow-white frozen ammonia, but now it was all dyed redder than Mars. Then I took the plunge right into it. Surprise! The stuff was plants! Plants as big as meadows, bright red, floating around in those clouds of frozen ammonia like seaweed! Then I noticed that the ammonia around them wasn't frozen any more and peeked at the outside thermometer. I couldn't believe it. It was above zero. Then I forgot about the temperature because it dawned on me that I was lost. I couldn't see a thing but drifting ammonia fog and those tangles of red floating plants like little islands all around. Cutting down the motor, I eased along.

But my green boat must have showed up like a lighthouse in all that red, because it
2—PLANET—Fall

wasn't long until I spotted a purple and green hopper-scorp traveling straight toward me, sort of rowing along with a pair of stubby wings. He didn't seem to be making much effort, even though he was climbing vertically up from the planet. In fact, he didn't seem to be climbing at all but just going along horizontally. There just wasn't any up or down in that crazy place. It must be that anti-grav field, I concluded. The air was getting different, too, now that I was further in. I'm no chemist, and I couldn't have gotten out there to experiment if I had been, but those plants were certainly doing something to that ammonia and methane. The fog thinned, for one thing, and the temperature rose to nearly forty.

Meanwhile the hopper-scorp reached the ship. Hastily I squirted some of my Scorpion-Come-Hither lure on the chest of my spacesuit, opened the lock, and popped out, brave as could be. Face to face with that thing, though, I nearly lost my grip on the handle. In fact, I'd have fainted dead away right there if Pard Hoskins hadn't been there already and lived. If that little shrimp could do it, I could, too.

I braced up and tapped out the greeting Pard had taught me. My fiendish-looking opponent tapped right back, inquiring why the hell I was back so soon when I knew that Akroida was all set to carve me into steaks for just any meal. But the tone was friendly and even intimate—or rather, the taps were. There was even a rather warm expression discernible in the thing's eyes, so I took heart and decided to ignore the ferocious features surrounding those eyes. After all, the poor sinner's map was made of shell, and he wasn't responsible for its expression.

I tapped back very politely that he must be mistaking me for someone else. "I've never been here before, and so I've never met the charming lady," I informed him. "However, I have something very special in the way of jewels—not with me, naturally—and the rumor is that she might be interested."

He reared back at that, and reaching up, plucked his right eye out of the socket and reeled it out to the end of a two-foot tentacle, and then he examined me with it just like an old-time earl with one of those things they called monocles. Pard hadn't

warned me about those removable eyes, for reasons best known to himself, I still wake up screaming. . . .

Anyway, when that thing pulled out its eye and held it toward me, I backed up against the side of the ship like I'd been half-electrocuted. Then I gagged. But I could still remember that I had to live in that suit for awhile, so I held on. Then that monstrosity reeled in the eye, and I gagged again.

My actions didn't bother him a bit. "Jewels, did you say?" he tapped out thoughtfully, just like an ordinary business man, and I managed to tap out yes. He drifted closer; close enough to get a whiff. . . .

A SHUDDER of ecstasy stiffened him. His head and eyes rolled with it, and he wafted closer still. Right there I began to harbor a premonition that there might be such a thing as being too popular in Scorpion, but I thrust this sneak-thief idea back into limbo.

Taking advantage of his condition, I boldly tapped out, "How's about taking me on a guided tour through this red spinach patch to Akroida, old pal?" Or words to that effect.

He lolled his hideous cranium practically on my shoulder. "Anything! Just anything you desire, my dearest friend."

I tried to back off from him a bit, but the ship stopped me. "I'm Casey Ritter. What's your label, chum?"

"Attaboy," he ticked coyly.

"Attaboy?" Things blurred around me. It couldn't be. It was just plain nuts. Then I got a glimmer through my paralyzed gray matter. "Who named you that?"

He simpered. "My dear friend, Pard Hoskins."

I breathed again. How simple could I get? He'd already mistaken me for Pard, hadn't he? Then I remembered something else. "How come you aren't mad at him? Don't you hate yellow, too?"

He hung his silly head. "I fear I am colorblind," he confessed sadly.

Right there I forgave him for pulling that eye on me. He was the guide I needed, the one who had got Pard out alive. I almost hugged him. "Lead off, old pal," I

sang out, and then had to tap it. "I'll follow in my boat."

Well, I'd met the first of the brood and was still alive. Not only alive but loved and cherished, thanks to Pard's inventiveness and to a kindly fate which had sent Pard's old pal my way. A great man, Pard Hoskins. How had he made friends with the brute in the first place?

Being once more inside my spaceboat, I raised my helmet, which was like one of those head-pieces they used to put on suits of armor instead of the usual plastic bubble. And it was rigged out with phony antennae and mandibles and other embellishments calculated to interest my hosts. Whether it interested them or not, it was plenty uncomfortable for me.

Peeking out the porthole I saw that my guide was fidgeting and looking over his shoulder at my ship, so I eased in the controls and edge after him. To my surprise a vapor shot out of a box that I had taken for a natural lump on his back, and he darted away from me. I opened the throttle and tore after him among the immense red blobs that were now beginning to be patterned with dozens of green-and-purple scorpions, all busy filling huge baskets with buds and tendrils, no doubt.

Other scorpions oared and floated about in twos and threes in a free and peaceable manner that almost made me forget that I was scared to death of them, and they stared at my boat with only a mild interest that would have taught manners to most of my fellow citizens of Earth.

It wasn't until we had covered some two hundred miles of this that something began to loom out of the mist, and I forgot the playboys and the field workers. It loomed higher and higher. Then we burst out into a clearing several miles in diameter, and I saw the structure clearly. It was red, like everything else in this screwy place, and could only have been built out of compressed blocks of the red plant.

In shape it was a perfect octagon. It hung poised in the center of the cleared space, suspended on nothing. It had to be at least a mile in diameter, and its sides were pierced with thousands of openings through which its nightmare occupants appeared and disappeared, drifting in and out like they

had all the time in the world, I stared until my eyeballs felt paralyzed.

Pard was right again. These critters had brains. And my S. S. C. persecutor was right, too. That anti-grav secret was worth more than any string of rocks in the system, including the Killicut Emeralds.

Then I swallowed hard. Attaboy was leading me straight across to a window. Closing my helmet, my fingers fumbled badly. My brain was fumbling, too. "Zero hour, chump!" it told me, and I shuddered. Picking up the first hundred pounds of the arsenic, I wobbled over to the airlock.

III

THAT palace was like nothing on earth. Naturally, you'll say, it's on Jupiter. But I mean it was even queerer than that. It was like no building on any planet at all. And, in fact, it wasn't on a planet; it was floating up there only two hundred miles in from the raw edge of space.

In that building everything stayed right where it was put. If it was put twelve or fifty feet up off the floor, it stayed there. Not that there wasn't gravity. There was plenty of gravity to suit me—just right, in fact—and still they had furniture sitting around in the air as solid as if on a floor. Which was fine for flying hopper-scorpis, but what about Casey Ritter, who hadn't cultivated even a feather?

Attaboy, however, had the answers for everything. Towing me from the airlock to the window ledge, he again sniffed that delectable odor on my chest, caressed me with his front pair of legs while I manfully endured, and then without warning tossed me onto his back above the little box and flew off with me along a tunnel with luminous red walls.

We finally came to the central hall of the palace, and at the sight of all that space dropping away, I clutched at his shell and nearly dropped the arsenic. But he didn't have any brakes I could grab, so he just flew out into mid-air in a room that could have swallowed a city block, skyscrapers and all. It was like a mammoth red cavern, and it glowed like the inside of a red light.

No wonder those scorpions like green and purple. What a relief from all that red!

A patch in the middle of the hall became a floating platform holding up a divan twenty feet square covered with stuff as green as new spring grass, and in the center of this reclined Akroida. It had to be. Who else could look like that? No one, believe me, boys and girls, no one!

Our little Akroida was a pure and peculiarly violent purple—not a green edge anywhere. She was even more purple than my fancy enameled space suit, and she was big enough to comfortably fill most of that twenty-foot couch. To my shrinking eyes right then she looked as big as a ten-ton cannon and twice as mean and dangerous. She was idly nipping here and there as though she was just itching to take a hunk out of somebody, and the way the servants were edging away out around her, I could see they didn't want to get in range. I didn't blame them a bit. Under the vicious sag of her Roman nose, her mandibles kept grinding, shaking the jewels that were hung all over her repulsive carcass, and making the Halcyon Diamond on her chest blaze like a bonfire.

Attaboy dumped me onto a floating cushion where I lay clutching and shuddering away from her and from the void all around me, and went across to her alone with the arsenic.

Akroida rose up sort of languidly on an elbow that was all stripped bone and sharp as a needle. She pulled an eyeball out about a yard and scanned Attaboy and the box. He closed in to the couch all hunched over, ducked his head humbly half-a-dozen times, and pushed the box over beside her. Akroida eased her eyeball back, opened the box and sniffed, and then turned to Attaboy with a full-blown Satanic grin. I could hear her question reverberate away over where I was.

"Who from?" asked Akroida.

That conversation was telegraphed to me blow by blow by the actions of those hopper-scorpis. I didn't need their particular brand of Morse Code at all.

"Who from?" Attaboy cringed lower and blushed a purple all-over blush. "Dear lady, it is from an interspace trader who possesses some truly remarkable jewels," he confessed coily.

Akroida toyed with the Halcyon Diamond and ignored the bait. "His name?" she de-

manded. And when he told her, with a bad stutter in his code, she reared up higher on her skinny elbow and glared in my direction. "Casey Ritter? Never heard of him. Where's he from?"

Well, after all, she wasn't blind. He had to confess. "I—uh—the stones were so amazing, Royal Akroida, that I didn't pay much attention to the—uh—trader. He does seem to resemble an—ah—earthman." He ducked his head and fearfully waited.

A sort of jerking quiver ran through Akroida. She reared up even higher. Her mean Roman nose twitched. "An earthman? Like Pard Hoskins?"

Attaboy shrank smaller and smaller. He could only nod dumbly.

The storm broke, all right. That old dame let out a scream like a maddened stallion and began to thrash around and flail her couch with that dragon's tail of hers.

I BEGAN to quake all over. My nice little jail, I thought frantically. My cozy little cell. Those dear sweet guards. I'd left them all to be eaten alive by that purple devil. Why didn't I bat my silly brains out on my cell wall when this idea first sneaked in? Marooned on that damned hassock a hundred feet above the floor I began to think, and fast.

"Bring him here!" roared Akroida, tapping it out so fast it sounded like gunfire. She gnashed her mandibles and glared until I started shriveling. "Bring him here! He'll dare to come around and insult me, will he? I'll flail him limb from limb and chew his bones to shreds! I'll bite him into chunks! I'll . . . Bring him here!"

She made a furious lunge at Attaboy. Trembling and blanching to a muddy lavender, he got out of there and scrambled over to me with big tears rolling down his stiff shell cheeks. Why the poor purple sap, I thought, he really cares! These things really have feelings! I looked at him with new respect and even a little affection.

"Look, kid," I admonished, trying to keep my fingers from shaking as I tapped. "Just don't worry about a thing. I still think I can handle this. Just take me across slow and easy, and we'll hope for the best."

With a mournful sigh he picked me up, tossed me onto his shoulder, and as per

instructions, drifted over to the floating platform.

All I had was the little bottle of Pard's scorp-scent. "This had better be good!" I confided to the image of Pard Hoskins, which somehow managed to get between me and that raging she-dragon on the couch. "This had sure better be good, son!"

I waited until Akroida was leaning forward practically gnashing her mandibles in my face while her front pair of legs grabbed and pawed for me. She was too fat and bulky to jump at me, or I'd have been a dead planet-bo right there. But I had to take the chance. There wasn't a drop of perfume to waste. At the last moment I lifted that precious little bottle and squirted the stuff right in her face.

Her mandibles flew open and stayed there. Slowly her front legs dropped; a film of ecstasy formed over those wild glittering eyes. She sank back and began to croon. Yes, croon! My helmet vibrated with it.

Then her long skinny front legs made beckoning motions to me. Frosts of romance! She wanted me to share her couch!

Attaboy didn't ask if I was willing. Delightedly he dumped me beside her. And then, having inhaled some of that perfume himself and not being able to tear himself away, he forgot all about etiquette and curled up beside us to bask some more in those luscious mists.

WHAT'S more revolting than a hopper-scorp in a tantrum? I'll tell you, chums: a hopper-scorp in the throes of infatuation! Especially when the hopper-scorp in question is Akroida. For one thing, she's so big. And for another, she's so unmentionably thorough. She was infatuated from the spike on her repulsive forehead down to the devilish sting on her tail. With me!

I tried to tell her it was Attaboy she must love, not me. She merely wallowed her hideous head, as big as a bucket, in my suffering lap, clattering it against my enameled space suit; she rolled her horrible eyes while her whole monstrosity of a body twitched and quivered with emotion. I tried to turn the conversation to the emeralds. She wasn't even interested. We hadn't needed the emeralds at all; we'd only needed Pard's special concoction. Furtively, behind

the horseplay, I began to plan to salvage those emeralds for myself.

That stuff must have been making me delirious, too.

I don't know how long that blood-curdling love scene went on. That awful she-scorp picked me up and rocked me while I scraped diamonds and rubies along my visor and chest. She signalled servants who were hovering on all sides taking in the show, and they rushed to bring tidbits that I had to hide behind cushions because I couldn't open my helmet in that atmosphere. Then the servants, getting whiffs of that cursed perfume, would snuggle up with us, until there wasn't elbow room on that big couch. Akroida would churn her tail around and knock them all off so that she could cuddle me better. Then she got the idea of singing to me. And my air was running out.

Finally, while I still had a bit of air left, the jag began to wear off, and Akroida slumped over and went to sleep holding me tenderly against her breast-shell. The moment I felt her grip relax, I wiggled out of there. Attaboy was fast asleep too. Desperately I decided that I could row through the air if those scorps could. Grabbing Attaboy's arm, I stepped off into nothing. Sure enough, the anti-grav worked for me, too. Sweating with the thought of what would have been left of Casey Ritter if it hadn't, I sort of swam away from there, towing my guide. Out at the boat, I anchored him outside the airlock and crawled inside. I'm not ashamed to admit that I got out of my helmet, gasped in some good old oxygen, and collapsed. What a day!

IV

WHEN the time rolled around for my next visit to Akroida, I decided to play it cool and careful. I was fortified with a snooze, a slug of Scotch, and a meal, but I still wasn't busting out with courage. I made a mental note to be damn cautious about that perfume. Maybe it was necessary to overdo it that first time, with her shouting for my blood, but that was all past I hoped.

I sprayed just a tiny bit on my suit, calculated to soothe and lure but not to excite. I wanted no more cuddling with Akroida,

please! Then with my pal Attaboy, I stiffened my backbone and plunged out into that poison gas they call atmosphere. I let Attaboy ferry me. He was very hazy about our return trip from Akroida's chamber, so I decided to leave him ignorant. No use to let even him know I could locomote the scorpion way. I might need to make a get-away, and surprise might be of the very essence.

But I didn't need to worry. Old Akroida had slept off her jag, and right away I found out that she wasn't queen-scorp for nothing. The old girl was real canny. She made Attaboy park me on a hassock just within tapping distance, and sat there holding her head in a way that made me soften with sympathy, knowing just how she felt. Many's the time. . . . Yes, sir, poor old Ak was nursing a real, ten-karat hangover. She waved a claw so feebly it didn't even stir those ropes of jewels hung all over her. "Casey Ritter," she tapped. "What did you do to me?"

All to myself, inside my hard-shell suit, I began to laugh; but it was no laughing matter, because she was beginning to regain her strength. She pointed a claw at me, and it was quite a bit steadier than the wave had been. "You did something!" she accused, and very intelligently, too, for a body that had never before had a hangover. "What was it?"

I didn't like the tone of that, and began tapping out a hasty denial. "Not intentionally, noble queen, believe me! I simply brought you that exquisite perfume as a gift from an admirer of yours whom I met on my way here. I had no idea how strong it was. I should have tested it first on your servant here." I pointed to Attaboy. "I can see that we need to thin it some, but it's wonderful, isn't it, now?"

She didn't even flutter an antenna at this coyness. "Earthman," she tapped out sternly, "you want something. Earthmen always bring trouble, and they always want something! No Earthman brings presents to Akroida from simple friendship. Tell me what you're after, Casey Ritter!"

I sighed. "O.K., noble queen. I just wanted to calm you down so I could talk to you. I didn't have any idea that perfume would affect you that way. I just thought

you'd like it, and then you'd be pleasant and we could talk."

She snorted like an old war horse, but that hurt her head. After a minute of clutching it, she groaned, and then tapped carefully, "I'm calm now. You can talk. What do you want?"

"Fine," I tapped out heartily. "I want to make a trade with you."

Her lack of enthusiasm would have chilled a wooden Indian. But I figured that the time had come to get on with it, regardless. She just wasn't going to stall, or let me, either.

"Ah, yes, a trade!" was all she said, but she gave it a nasty twist.

I plunged. "I want to swap your anti-gravity secret for a string of the most magnificent emeralds you ever dreamed of, Akroïda. Why, they'd make that batch you're wearing look like little glass beads! You'll have to see them to—"

She didn't let me finish. A sort of high-pitched cackle of amazement issued from her bony jaws; but then she floored me by changing the subject completely, I thought. That was just my little error. A man can sure miss the boat when dealing with these foreign races. She began to ask me questions about the Earth, and was she interested! She even forgot about her hang-over. And she completely ignored the emeralds. You'd have thought I hadn't even mentioned the things.

THIS went on for about an hour, and then all of a sudden she leaned back on her paris-green cushions, inhaled a pinch of arsenic, and began to chuckle a sort of brassy chuckle that sent shivers down my back. The chuckles got bigger and bigger until she busted out into a full-size horse laugh that would have jangled the chandelier if there'd been one to jangle.

Her head bounced back and forth on her skinny neck, and the Halcyon Diamond bounced around on her chest like a loose headlight. All her jewels began to bounce and jangle. Drove of servants swarmed around to peek, while Attaboy just floated there with his mouth wide open. I nudged him. "What's so funny?" I asked, but he only shook his head dumfounded.

That awful laughing was sure giving me

the creeping jeevies, and it wasn't until she finally tapered off in a series of snorts and giggles that I began to breathe again. I braced myself for what might come next. But talk about unpredictable females! Human or scorpion, they're all the same. She floored me again.

"It's a deal, Casey Ritter!" She tapped out the words with relish. "Fair and open, straight across the board. Those emeralds for our anti-gravity plans and formulae."

I was stunned. A statement like that after that laugh! And she hadn't even seen the emeralds. You couldn't tell old horse trader Ritter that there wasn't something phony. But she just snickered at my expression and waved to the servants who were still hovering around. It took a dozen of them to hoist her up.

With me following on Attaboy, we flew down a serpentine hallway for half a mile until we came to a room even bigger than her audience chamber, only this one was filled with machinery suspended in the air just like the furniture was up above. It was big machinery, too, but it didn't seem to matter.

Akroïda waved a feeler at it all. "Just to show you that I'm not holding anything back," she tapped out. "Here it all is, and there on the wall are the plans and descriptions."

Attaboy flew me over, and I stared at them. They were a real neat job, and the mathematics were the same old math we use on Earth, or I was even more of a sucker than I thought I was. I shook the old bean to clear it, but I still couldn't get a glimmer about the caper she was staging. But I could still hear that laugh. . . .

Well, the rest is history, as the books say. With me still not believing a word of it, we made the trade, fair and open, as Akroïda had said. She even let me stand by while her scorps copied the plans, and then I checked and rechecked a dozen times. Not a phony mark anywhere. When I handed over the emeralds, she cooed in rapture. A thing like that coo? Well, she did.

Akroïda didn't hardly know I was going. She just waved me, her lover-for-a-day, carelessly away and went on stroking those beauties, while the hopper-scorps hovered around in such crowds that Attaboy and I

had to elbow our way out of there. As a parting gift, out at the edge of that hellish Red Spot, I reached out of the lock and handed Attaboy the little bottle with what was left of the perfume.

"Here you are, pal," I tapped. "This'll promote you to Court Lover number one. Kiss the old girl for me."

V

BACK on Earth I was still trancing around feeling the air with my fingers and pinching myself here and there just to make sure I had really got out of that inferno all in one piece, when they hauled me out to the airport to present me with my ship. They even made a ceremony of it and gave me a medal for distinguished service to Mankind. And who do you think presented the medal?

I looked at the dapper little figure waltzing over all toggled out in the S. S. C. uniform, and then I did a double take. It was no other than my old pal of the Iron College, perfume-manufacturer for hopper-scorpis, Pard Hoskins. He came over and clapped me on the back, but I didn't feel a thing. I was paralyzed.

So I'd been taken for a ride right from the start. So they'd outsmarted me all the way: out-fought and out-figured me, and even planted a stoolie on me and made me like it.

I didn't hear a word they said, nor even notice when they pinned the medal on. When they got through with me, I just crawled into my beautiful new ship like it was an old tin can and headed out. I didn't even care right then if I landed back in Akroida's bony lap. I'd have stuck my head in her mandibles and told her, "Chew it up, Ak. It's just a cabbage, anyway."

But a funny thing happened. Out there, mooning along all alone in the dark with not a soul in a million miles, I heard Akroida laughing. It was a horrible sound, a kind of metallic neighing and snorting, but pretty soon I began laughing, too. I didn't know what the joke was, but all of a sudden I knew I'd find out some day. It did me a lot of good. I braced up and went on to Venus, where I made some real good trades.

I didn't try any more capers, though. I was all capered out.

It wasn't until a year later, in a joint on Mars, that I ran into Pard Hoskins again. I gave him the old frost, but he only grinned sort of sad and touched me for some of that filthy Martian beer. He looked real seedy.

"What's the matter?" I asked, as sarcastic as I could manage. "They sending you over the road again to nab another sucker?"

He shook his head, and sighed into his beer. "I got fired, Casey," he confessed. "Over that there Killicut caper. Those plans—I might of known." He shook his head again like a tired old man.

A shiver ran over me. "Here it comes," I thought.

"What about those plans?" I asked. "Weren't they all O.K.?"

He sighed again. "Nope. Oh, the plans was O.K. They was strictly bona fide. Only they won't work on Earth. I told 'em about that anti-grav in the first place. Then I almost caused an inter-world incident stealin' the Killicut Emeralds. And now the damn thing won't work on Earth!" He set to chewing his lip and staring into his beer.

I took him by his scrawny shoulder and shook. "Why won't it work?" I yelled. "I knew there was something, the way she laughed! Why won't it work?"

He stared dully at me. "Laugh, did she? Well, she sure had the last laugh. It won't work in our atmosphere; just on a chlorine or methane planet. It works like the poles of a battery. That Great Red Spot is just the negative pole. All those there plants change the atmosphere just enough to make it a strong negative field. Then all they have to do is counter-balance that with enough positive, and there they are. It works like anti-gravity, only it ain't. Only we ain't got an atmosphere we can work that way. Cripes! So she laughed!" His hoarse voice stopped and he stared bitterly at the wall. Then he cussed for two minutes without stopping. He took a big swig of that rotten beer. "I'll bet she's laughing herself fat, the old rip!"

Well, I hope she is. In the dead of night sometimes I can hear her; and pretty soon I'm laughing, too. . . .

By
FOX HOLDEN

*McGinty's first love was Moon-shaped; gutted
and inhumanly beautiful. And it served him
well all the days of his short life.*



Down Went McGinty

I GUESS you could say I hated Kolomar. Not with the same hatred I had for the Comrades, but I hated him. There were the obvious reasons—he'd beat me out of my general's star, and got the top job with

Security that I'd been promised for the last five years. It was because of him that I was still stuck with the command of a second-rate satellite. But there was an even more obvious reason, and it was the same one everybody else had.

Kolomar had the authority, both above and below the 120-mile limit, that went with being Director-General of the FBSI. He took that to mean head cop, and judge and jury as well.

Illustration by Joseph Eberle



There are a lot of ways of handling authority.

You could be human. Or you could be like Kolomar. And if you were like him, you never made any mistakes: you'd go to the end of the Universe if you had to, and when you wound up a case, the front office would always have a gold star waiting for your report card. The only thing good anybody else would have to say for you was that at least, you were on the right side and not pitching on the Comrades' team.

He was towering over me now as I knelt in front of the wrecked safe; he couldn't have missed the look in my eyes; but it was like shooting a pistol at an atomic screen. I might as well have kept looking at the thing in my hand that I'd just picked up off the deck.

He towered over me, that sour face of his hard as rock, and only the cold blue eyes showing that he was two jumps ahead of me; that he understood all about the thing in my hand, and that I wasn't as innocent about it as I was trying to make him think.

"Mark it Exhibit 1," he rattled, "and add the name of the man to whom it belongs."

I straightened up. I tossed the good luck piece to my desk; it was like any ordinary good luck charm—a century-old 1900 50-cent piece—and under the satellite's one-third G it just floated down to the desk top like a leaf falling off a tree.

"How do I know whose it is?" I bluffed. "I'm boss of sixty men here, Kolomar. Besides the twenty that come up every week on the supply shuttle. And they're a different twenty each time at that—"

He stared me straight down.

"How long have you been here, Colonel Kenton? Ten years, isn't it?"

I didn't answer him. He knew. He'd been a shuttle-lieutenant when I'd first arrived on the satellite. He had a brother who was floor leader of the Senate. It was ten years later, and now he was Director-General of the Federal Bureau of Space Investigation. I was still a colonel. My brother was a schoolteacher.

"The crews here still have to sign contracts for five-year tricks. You've known two full crews, and whoever did this—" he turned his close-cropped head and nodded at the gaping Top Secret file in the blown

safe—"is obviously a member of the crew you've got now. You know it; I know it. You've got a reputation, Kenton, for getting to know your men. They say you know 'em as if they were your own brothers in six months' time."

He didn't bother making it a verbal accusation.

"I could only—I couldn't even make a bad guess as to whose it is, sir."

"You've got twenty-four hours to make a good one. I want him by 1700, Earth-Standard, tomorrow. That's an order."

Then he just turned around, the light of the cold cathodes glittering off his shoulder insignia and the silver trim on his black leatherite space tunic, and left my office cubicle the way he'd come. Fast. Murderous. Accusing.

If he had to go to Hell and back to win, he would.

I WAITED until Control signalled that he'd got back aboard his official shuttle and blasted into a return orbit, and then I buzzed for my execs, Haliburton, Knight and Loftus.

Even a second rate satellite of a second rate power has three execs, although I guess a lot of people back home think it's a one man show, putting in time to save national face while the grade A job—the one with the big red star on the side—circles Earth five hundred miles further out doing all the "important" work. The one that beat us up here by ten years. The one owned by the government which said we could put up a satellite of our own if we wanted to, but suggested just how big it would be, just what equipment it would and wouldn't carry, how far up it'd circle, how big a crew it would have.

Suggested, you know, the way they do when treaties are drawn up around the New-U. N. conference tables. It never says in the treaties what will happen if certain agreements aren't adhered to. It doesn't say who has "the edge," as McGinty calls it; it doesn't carefully point out who was firstest with the mostest. It doesn't have to.

This is peace, Comrade. Just don't get egg on your face.

It was a couple of minutes before my execs walked in. I was still standing, still

looking down at the ancient good luck piece on my desk when they did. Major Haliburton, Meteorology detail; Major Knight, Astronomical; Lieutenant Loftus, Records and Research.

Military?

Only the personnel. Nothing else of a military nature ever found its way into the treaty. Strangely enough, it had somehow never even been mentioned.

"Take the weight off your feet. Rest, smoke, and hold onto your heads. Look at the safe; no, I didn't do it. Followed Procedure Eighteen dash whatever-the-hell-it-is, called Kolomar's headquarters; he came in person. Just blasted off. Now *you* know. I don't have to tell you what was in that top file."

Short stocky, red-headed Loftus, the youngest of the three was the first to open up. Haliburton had his tall, starved-looking frame still half in and half out of his plastic-foam chair; Knight's beefy face was still kind of blank, as though he hadn't quite yet taken it all in. Well, they knew me. I was short and sweet, always answered questions, and tried never to bore people. Too lax, some people liked to say. But still here after ten years.

"The—microstats, Ken?" Loftus was half-asking, half-saying.

"Yeah. And this." I picked up the good luck piece, tossed it to him. He took one look, passed it to the others. "Kolomar gives me twenty-four hours to give him the man who owns it. It was dropped in front of the safe. The only clue, if you can call it a clue. But to Kolomar's traffic-ticket mind, it's automatic evidence of guilt. And he'd fly clear to Aldebaran to prove it. O.K., questions."

It was silent in the little cubicle for a second or so. I didn't hurry them; I wanted it to sink in, and they'd need some time. I audioed my orderly room, told the sergeant on duty to black the office out to the rest of the installation for the next ten minutes.

Then after a minute or so Knight looked up from the good luck piece, and a soft voice that didn't match his beefy build simply said, "McGinty's," in that half-statement, half-question way Loftus had used.

"Nuts," Haliburton said. And "nuts" from Haliburton was like "god-damn non-

sense" from anybody else who wasn't quite the scholarly type Haliburton was. He didn't look like a Spaceman or have the breezy talk of one, but he sure knew his meteorology. The Comrades at least let us figure out weather reports.

"Doesn't make sense; I second the nuts," Lofus said. "What the hell would McGinty, McGinty of all people, do with stuff like—like that? Unless—"

"Eight years and still a maintenance-tech third. They don't get much beer money," Knight said half to the rest of us and half to the plastalloy deck. "He—"

Haliburton laughed a funny, halting little chuckle. "That's ridiculous. McGinty likes his beer, his accordion, his science-fiction and hates cheap women. If possible, he hates the very sight of a Comrade to an even greater extent. We all know McGinty. Our 21st Century Gunga Din, gentlemen. Not a latter-day Quisling."

There was a quiet second. Then Loftus said,

"We've all seen him walk that thing across his knuckles a thousand times."

"Maybe a plant," Knight said.

"He'd say that, of course," Loftus answered. "But—"

"Hold it a minute," Haliburton broke in again. "Question, Ken."

"Now we're getting places," I said. "Shoot."

"Granting for the moment that that big Irishman, unhappy and moody as he sometimes gets when he recalls his failure to qualify for a degree in science, might have the sudden desire to take it out on the world, to sell us out. Might even have, at the moment, the spark of genius it would take to make off with those microstats. Only how the devil would he know they even existed, much less were even in duplicate copy and on file here?"

That was the nub of it, of course. Aside from myself and the three men before me, it was impossible that any other man in the station, or any man crewing a shuttle could know of the Pentagon's plan to get a full-sized, full-rigged satellite into Space, with real Military, which would leave the Comrades screaming about a busted treaty, but powerless to do anything about it. No, it wouldn't give us the edge, but at least it

would put us on a par, and after twenty years of being second-rate, that at least would be some thing.

The political end I didn't know much about, conference table double-talk that would invalidate a treaty that hadn't been morally valid in the first place, but had been agreed to by interests instead of by the people they allegedly represented. It had always been a shade too fast for me to follow. All I knew was that even though first-rate powers could command more resources to do a job than second-rate ones, intellectually free scientists could always come up with smarter answers than those whose inventiveness had been stifled by the demands and limitations of a police state, however all-powerful militarily and politically.

Brains are brains; both sides have 'em. It's what you're motivated to do with them that counts. That, and the importance attached by people to the product of those brains.

TWENTY years ago, the Comrades had really gotten motivated. After they got what they wanted, they forgot about motivation and sat back to let the newest Hundred-Year Plan take care of the rest.

Twenty years ago, somebody on our side was short four billion bucks' worth of preventive medicine.

Now, after a couple of decades second-besting it, our side wanted to make up for lost time.

It was supposed to be a *coup d'état* sort of thing, a fast shuffle, both at the conference tables and out here in Space. Now you see it, now you don't.

As topkick on the Space end of it I was supposed to know what was going on; me, and my execs, down to the day, the hour and the split second. But only the four of us. And none of us, studying those damned plans night after night for the last two months, had ever let the things further than arm's reach away from the safe in my office. They'd never been out of it except in our collective presence.

So I'd come on duty from my sleeping quarters that morning and relieved Loftus, whose week it was for the late duty behind my desk. Things had been Space-shape then. And as I'd told Kolomar when he got up

from Earthside after my frantic triple-E signal, I'd only been out of that office for about twenty minutes from the time I'd taken over from Loftus to the moment I'd triple-E'd FBSI. There'd been a breakdown in the water-recovery plant. Nothing serious, but regulations said I had to be on hand personally to supervise any major maintenance.

While I was gone the door to my office was automatically sono-sealed. And I had the key.

When I came back it was gaping open, and the safe was still smoking. My orderly room duty sergeant was sprawled across his desk, a nasty bluish lump on his forehead. When I finally brought him around he could hardly remember his name, let alone who or what had hit him.

Loftus' young, impatient voice snapped me out of my back tracking.

"—couldn't have known, of course," he was saying, answering Haliburton. "Neither McGinty nor anybody else. And that—that sort of narrows things down, doesn't it?" He threw a nervous look at Haliburton and Knight and at me, compressed his lips in a straight little line, and fumbled self-consciously for a cigarette.

"That's just as ridiculous," Haliburton said. "If any one of the four of us was attempting to outwit the other three, the planting of McGinty's talisman would be a little stupid, wouldn't it?"

I tried to stop walking back and forth; I tried to think about McGinty instead of wondering who I was sorest at, Kolomar or the Comrades. Patrick Michael McGinty, maintenance technician third class, as simple and straightforward as they come. He'd play that beat-up accordion for the sixty of us to make us smile and think about home, while he listened to the music by himself and thought his own thoughts.

Either that, on his own time, or good naturedly griping on the job about what slow pokes all scientists were, especially the Comrades, who with all their big muscles still hadn't got a workable Moon-landing ship together. Our side could build one, McGinty would tell you—"Sure, an' it's a bunch o' misers we are, or we'd be a-wadin' the canals o' Mars by now," he'd tell you, and sometimes made you half believe it.

McGinty was just a tech-third, but he was an honest-to-God Spaceman, maybe even more than the rest of us. "The further out y'go, the more th' edge y'got—an' leave all the other dir-ty business behind besides!"

He'd play that accordion of his and just look out a port hole at the stars while he did it. And when he did you could sort of link up that science degree disappointment, that scolding of the scientists for their "slowness," that business about the misers and the canals of Mars, and the watching out the port hole as he played.

A brawny, rough-and-ready spaceman, yes.

A spy and a thief of top-secret documents, no.

No, and good luck piece be damned.

I looked hard at my three execs.

"Kolomar gave me twenty-four hours," I said. "Whatever we do, we've got to do it without spilling the beans around ears that aren't supposed to hear. You know how scuttlebut races through a crew. Kolomar on one side of us—" I saw Knight wince, "—and the Comrades on the other. Mr. X in between."

"If we put the arm on McGinty," Knight said in that soft voice of his, his beefy face unnaturally white, "Kolomar won't give him a chance. Be sending an innocent man into God-knows-what just to stall for our own skins. And when Kolomar found out it wasn't McGinty, he'd keep right on going, right on to the end of Space itself."

Whatever Knight might've said next never got out. The top-urgent signal on my video panel blinked like crazy. If they'd got through my sergeant and the orders I'd given him, they must want me for real, so I answered.

It was Control. The face on the video belonged to the captain in charge. The voice on the audio echoed the all-hell look on the face.

The voice said one of our Moon-orbit rigs—an L-8, incapable of course of a landing but rigged up out of thin aluminum structural beams with a couple of small rocket motors, fuel tanks, and personnal space for strictly observational work—had just blasted clear of our own orbit and was headed Moonwards.

"So what the hell, captain—"

"McGinty's flying it, sir," the voice said. "*Unscheduled. All by himself.*"

MY THREE execs just sat where they were for maybe a full second, mute, their faces immobilized into unintelligent expressions. It seemed that it took me an hour to snap out of it, yet I was moving before they were . . . toward my Earth-communications panel.

Then the three of them were up and starting for the door.

"Hold it!" I hollered, and pointed at the miniature Earth-scanner in the bulkhead above my desk. It was only about a quarter the size of the one in Meteorology, but it still gave me a full view of Earth, silently rolling there in its black frame of Space. They caught on. There was still about ten minutes left of the sixty minutes we had over our own part of the world. Ten minutes more, and we would have been on the other half of our two-hour trip around, and unable to contact home for over an hour.

I fumbled the switch open that put me straight through on a tight, direct 3-E band to the Pentagon. I was talking to Kolomar within less than two minutes.

He didn't move a muscle while I told him what had happened. But he made the grimest picture my Earth-video had ever framed.

"You'll effect pursuit at once, Kenton. Take what armament your maintenance can fabricate. If he is simply attempting escape, he'll find there's not far he can go. Since he is an inexperienced pilot, you should be able to overhaul him with little difficulty. However, the more logical probability is that he's defecting to them. He undoubtedly has the microstats in his possession, and will rendezvous with one of their own orbit craft. It will be your responsibility to destroy him before that rendezvous can be completed."

"But sir, there's no way of being sure—"

"Destroy him."

My protest was completely lost to a cut contact and a dead screen.

I muttered something and began a half-hearted attempt to contact McGinty. Between signals I scrawled a fast note and handed it to Knight. It told him to order

an L-8 ready with an extra rocket unit bolted onto its stern someplace. For the extra power, he'd need a set of transition coordinates for a modified orbit, but that would be up to his department.

The note said for Haliburton to take care of having maintenance rig up a couple of hydrazine torpedoes of some kind. Hell, we weren't even allowed pistols up here, and Kolomar had just said "destroy him." More official double-talk. But, sometimes a maintenance crew was good for something a little better than keeping the rust off door knobs. It was a pretty old rule-of-thumb in Space—if you haven't got it, make it.

And right now, the responsibility for those stats was mine. All mine.

I kept Loftus with me, and kept trying to raise McGinty. The chances were he wouldn't answer, of course. But there was nothing else to do until Haliburton and Knight buzzed me that they had everything ready.

"Guess you'd better forget it," Loftus said.

I nodded, tried a final signal pattern, and then quit trying.

I looked into Loftus' young face. It wasn't hard to read.

"Go ahead and say it," I told him.

He looked up, and his mouth twisted into a cynical smile.

"We all fall for happy accordion music and an Irish brogue. All fall for a guy because he appeals to what there is inside people like us that says some guys you can always trust. Maybe, Ken, we deserve to be second-raters."

"Maybe," I said. Only I was thinking about men like Kolomar. About right and wrong, success and failure, always in terms of physical size, physical strength. Whomp me and I'll whomp you back harder. Twenty-first century civilization—still the spoiled brats of a half century ago. "Maybe we do," I said, and wondered if we always would.

"What was it McGinty was always saying?" Loftus asked quietly. "Something about—the further out y'go, the more th' edge y'got—an' leave all the other dirty business behind besides."

"Your brogue smells, kid. But that's about the way it went."

"Somehow, I never thought he meant it, this way. Thought he had something else in mind. The way he always looked out the port when he played, At the stars."

"I know, I know," I snapped. "Can it, can it."

Loftus shut up, but I knew what he meant, had known it before he said it, because I'd felt that way about McGinty for a long time, myself. McGinty played accordion music because it was something a little better than the canned stuff we could get on our radios. He had tried for that science degree because he'd wanted to make himself a little better, if he could. He griped about how "slow" the scientists were, griped about the "misers" we had in our politics. Just as a reaction against a state of affairs that he thought might be made a little better. It had always seemed to me that in McGinty's simple philosophy, if you could just get started making things a little better here and there, pretty soon, a lot of things would be a lot better everywhere. Not second-rate.

I drummed my fingers on the communications panel, watching Loftus and waiting for either Knight or Haliburton to buzz me that things were set. I started to get up and that was when my video signal started its nervous blinking. In a single movement I had it switched on. It framed McGinty's big red face.

He was drunk, and his blue eyes were blazing the way they always blazed, drunk or sober.

"Y'been a'callin' me, Colonel? Well here I am! Lookin' fer these, I'll bet!" He waved a huge gauntleted paw in front of the screen. It clutched the thin plastisheen envelope that contained the microstats.

Loftus was out of his chair in an instant, crowding the video next to me and triggering a desk recorder into action at the same time.

"Look, you crazy fool," I bellowed. "I'm not going to ask you what or why, McGinty, not now. But we're coming out after you, and you'd better be turned around and headed back this way by the time we've started."

"Yi, yi, Colonel! Kolomar's a-burnin' is 'e? Ha!" McGinty's red beard bristled, and brick-red hair straggled down into snapping eyes. "He's a slow-poke like a-a-ll the rest

of 'em! Only I've got me a deal, Kenny me b'y!"

"McGinty, for God's sake! Kolomar'll hunt you to the end of Time!"

"Will 'e, now!"

"There's nothing he won't do or can't get done to see you in the death chamber, McGinty. No matter where you go or whom you meet—"

"Sure, an' y'wouldn't be a'kiddin' now, Colonel, would ye? No, y'wouldn't kid McGinty! Ye're not the blarneyin' type, Colonel! Well, come along, then. You take the high road an' I'll take the low—" Singing, suddenly, singing like a drunken madman, and then the screen went blank.

As it did, Haliburton buzzed.

"Ready Ken," he said.

And Loftus and I headed for the landing nets and a taxi berth.

BECAUSE he was blasting all the way, it would take McGinty slightly more than twenty-two hours to get from the satellite into an orbit around the Moon. The regular way, blast and drift, it takes about seventy-one. But McGinty was in a hurry.

There was no knowing how soon before that twenty-two hours he would be meeting the Comrades. Nor was there any way of knowing if McGinty intended to break his orbit when he neared the Moon and head on out into Space. That way he'd end up a derelict with his fuel exhausted, smothered when his air was used up, and lost forever. Something began picking at the back of my mind, but I didn't have time to play with it.

With the extra rocket motor Knight had had jury-rigged to the stern of our L-8, there was a chance we could overtake McGinty an hour or so before he entered a lunar orbit, if that's what he was going to do. And if we'd been able to crowd on enough fuel.

Or, if he just kept on going, we were certain to overhaul him—and that was why neither of those two angles made much sense. From a practical point of view, anyway.

"It's a rendezvous set-up for certain," Knight said. He was strapped in the bow astrodome seat, working with the L-8's two-inch refractor.

Earth and our satellite rolled some twenty

hours and two hundred twenty thousand miles behind us; we were tired, we were apprehensive and edgy. We'd been powerful on all the way instead of blasting and drifting. But so had McGinty.

Knight had had McGinty's L-8 in his lenses almost from the hour we'd blasted out. There were just three of us—myself, Knight and Loftus. I'd left Haliburton behind as second-in-command and to take care of Kolomar when he came up, as he had. Right now, he was only a couple of hours behind us in the L-8 I'd ordered Haliburton to have ready and waiting for him.

There hadn't been anything else from McGinty. Not a flicker. And not a word either from the Comrades. Things should've been crackling about now. Their satellite had just rounded Earth's illumination an hour or so before, and they should be throwing cover-up messages at us by the barrel, wanting to know what was the meaning of an uncleared orbital flight, and why hadn't they been notified.

But not a word. At least not that Loftus had picked up on our own H-F. Maybe they were just going to play it straight—

"Hey, hey, here they are after all," Loftus said suddenly. "All translated and everything. Give a listen." He turned up the volume.

It was good cover-up, all right. Just as though they hadn't known a thing about it. Just discovered it and wanted a fast explanation.

I hollered to Knight. "You actually see any of their rigs up ahead?"

"Two of 'em. Just starting on an intersect with McGinty."

"Can we make it first, do you think?"

"Nip and tuck, skipper. Maybe. It's almost as if it's all a big surprise to 'em. They're still way out in left field, maybe not quite as close as we are."

Knight muttered something over the rasping voice on his H-F. "—ought to get an Academy Award—"

He was right. Their acting and their timing couldn't have been more perfect except that they had had to gamble from the first on getting to McGinty before we did and still make things look all innocence. Maybe we could make them lose that one, anyway. You could be too clever.

But they were armed, and that hedged their gamble pretty convincingly. We had two clumsy jury-rigged torpedoes which might or might not hit whatever they were fired at.

The voice halted, and then it was up to me. I was supposed to be the one to make up the excuses, not Kolomar. I was the one who had to give "an immediate account of the untoward and unadvised action" of my L-8s. And Kolomar would let me sweat it out by myself.

"What'll I tell 'em, Ken?"

"Tell 'em—oh, hell. Tell them one of our crew went Space-psycho, and that we're doing all in our power to recover him and the rig he's flying before any inconvenience can occur which might disturb the planned schedules of our esteemed Comrades of Space. One fairy tale's as good as another."

Loftus reworded the message as nice as pie, and then after a minute the H-F was quiet. For the record, things were fine. Of course, our Comrades were going to "assist" in the recovery of our wayward crewman—

"We'll beat 'em, I think!" Knight was hollering.

"Any guns—" Loftus began, I answered that one myself.

"They'd ruin their own show," I said. "A premature show of muscle would tip their hand. If they make it work this way, all we can ever do is accuse, but we won't be able to prove a damn thing. And they'll know what they want to know, and be ready for our quick little shuffle. They'll be ready at those conference tables. If they miss this time, they'll just try again later, another way."

"It sure reads fine," Loftus said. "But I wonder how soon they start shooting."

We were both at the starboard port, watching. We could see McGinty's L-8 out there, floating like a three-barrelled hour glass, its tiny rocket bank glowing red against the blackness, one side a blinding white brightness in the sun.

The Moon hung like a chewed-up white basketball below the both of us, and you could see the greenish cast of Earthshine stretching out a little beyond the night shadow over the ridge of the lunar Apennines.

"How do you suppose they ever got wise

to the microstats in the first place?" Loftus was asking.

"We're still not sure they did. Or sure that he—or sure of anything," I snapped back at him.

"But you think it's McGinty all right, by this time. I mean—"

"I guess so," I said.

HE TURNED from the port and looked square at me. His youthful face was a strained, white thing, and if I saw a certain innocence in his young eyes, I saw something else, too. He was the strange kid-man combination you get in Space—just a youngster on the one side, and a latter-day wizard on the other. A head full of scientific answers down to the last decimal point—and full of that other stuff that makes a young man a very young man; the kind of stuff we older guys like to wish could be true, but know just can't be.

"Add it up yourself," I said. I was looking over his shoulder and through the port again. There were other hour glasses out there now, further from McGinty than we were still, but not by much. And to our stern was another pin-point of winking red light and flashing whiteness. Kolomar. We were closing on McGinty's L-8 fast now, and I started for the closet where we kept the suits. Loftus grabbed my arm.

"Not the torpedoes if we can help it, kid," I said. "I'm going out when we pull above him. On a line. If I can grab onto any of the framework, maybe I can put his motors out of commission without blowing things apart. If I can, then maybe we can nudge him all the way around, and shove him all the way back if we have to."

Loftus just turned away. He was watching the red-white flash in the blackness that was Kolomar's rig. I knew what he was thinking, and I was glad he thought that way. Maybe, sometime, the youngsters could play things their way, and we'd have that something a "little better" that McGinty had always been hoping for.

And I guess Loftus knew the plan I outlined had less than a thousand-in-one chance of coming through. Even if I managed to break McGinty's fuel lines some way, this "nudging" business I talked about was probably ninety per cent hokum. Even

in an orbital state of comparative weightlessness there was still inertia to consider, and any direct contact we made with McGinty's L-8 could cave in our bulging plastic fuel tanks. That, or split him wide open.

But I'd never be able to sleep again if I didn't try something before Kolomar's torpedoes, and I didn't care what he saw me do.

I was all rigged out, standing by the airlock, about five hundred feet of line in one gauntlet and a reaction tube in the other, when Knight's voice slurred in my helmet receivers.

"Ken—hold it! He's busting the orbit! He's going to— my God. *Ken, he's ditching her Moonside!*"

I had a time getting over to the port Loftus was crowding. What Knight was saying was true. I made motions, and Loftus started helping me out of my cumbersome Space outfit while I watched.

We were just about dead center over the Moon itself, and McGinty had started drifting in what would have been a perfect, if wide, orbit around it. Continuing in it, he'd've circled the side opposite Earth, and then started back toward the orbit of our satellite. Either that, or, as we'd expected, broken from it and rendezvoused with one of the Comrades. Only it wasn't working that way.

MCGINTY was breaking his orbit, all right, but not toward Space. He was going *down*. He had cut the stern rockets and was using his bow jets to slow himself enough to kill the velocity that had balanced him in his orbit. Slowly but as surely as politicians have two faces, Moon gravity would take over, pull him down, split him wide open on the jagged edge of Aristillus crater.

"He's out of his head," I heard Loftus saying. "Clean gone. An L-8 can't land; an orbit rig can't take even two Gs and hold together."

McGinty was peeling off, falling.

We just stood at the port and watched. Knight kept him in the two-incher.

Falling in that lazy, gradual, ever-steepening airless glide until soon it would be
B—PLANET—Fall

straight up-and-down. The Moon just hung there, cold, bleak, waiting. Waiting to rip McGinty all to hell on the ragged peaks of its gutted, inhumanly beautiful terrain. A strange love affair had McGinty, through the satellite port as he played his accordion.

I was pulled out of it by the racket on the H-F receiver, and Loftus was clambering over to it as fast as I was.

"This is Kolomar," the voice said. "Destroy him. Now. That's an order, Kenton." Loftus looked at me. So did Knight.

I picked up a mobile mike, flicked it on. "This is Kenton," I said. "I don't believe we received your message correctly, general. In fact I'm certain we didn't! Over!"

"I said destroy him. And God help you, Kenton, if you can't hear me!"

No, I hadn't expected Kolomar to take anything back. He was still doing everything by the books.

Loftus asked him out, and then just stood there.

"Okay," I said, "you heard him!"

"But he's going to die anyway, Ken! Going to—"

"Damn it, fire those torpedoes!"

Loftus spun away from me, something shiny in his eyes, and started priming the two thin, long cylinders of hydrazine and HNO_3 for the make-shift torpedo tubes that maintenance had installed.

"Those aren't such hot looking jobs, are they, Loftus," I said. He looked up me, and that hot shine was still blazing in his eyes. "I hope you don't have any trouble aiming with those homemade tubes."

It took him a second, but he caught on.

The torpedoes missed McGinty's falling rig by a good three hundred yards apiece.

I let Loftus take a look.

"What's he doing?"

"Blasting like hell at the tail," the young lieutenant said. "He'll hit like one of those old-time ski jumpers! Between Aristillus and Autolycus, in that flat, open plain—"

I watched him hit.

And it was as Loftus said. He slewed onto the flat, dust-covered plain like a ski jumper, falling but going forward at a hell of a rate, probably using up the last of his fuel in a single, sustained, straight-ahead blast.

And then there was a flurry of dust

maybe ten miles long. And after that, even with the 'scope, you couldn't see anything.

"Good try," I heard myself saying.

"Might've made it!" Loftus said, hope ragged in his voice. "He just might've—"

"All alone, oxygen enough for almost two months if he cuts way down," I heard Knight say softly.

But I was already calling Kolomar.

"Destroyed," I said. And I wished I could've been lying to his teeth.

FROM the time Kolomar got back to Earth it took just two days for him, with maybe just a touch of help from his floor-leader brother, to pry the government loose from a half-billion bucks. It took him just twenty-four hours more to get the Pentagon to release plans for a Moon-landing ship that had been mouldering in a vault for the last fifteen years; plans that nobody'd known about since the day they were drawn, I guess; plans just waiting for that half-billion.

He had his toughest time with our own scientists. It was sort of the way McGinty had said. The thing would need weeks of study, months of testing, years to perfect, they told him.

He told them it was only going to take them a month to get it built.

I said I hated him and I do, but you have to give a Liberal-Democrat his due. As with every other job he tackled, when Kolomar wanted to move he knew where to go and he could move fast. And he had long practice at throwing his rank, and the rank that was always behind that. Right now, his job was to retrieve the microstats in McGinty's wrecked L-8—before the Comrades. And he was going to do that job if he had to sandbag the President himself.

The project was farmed out to I don't know how many of our biggest industries; all I ever heard was that it carried the highest work-priority any job had ever carried.

And the industries took it, triple-shift, day and night.

It still took longer than a month.

It took nine weeks. And then our shuttles were hauling up the parts, and extra crews were slamming them together as fast as they

arrived in the satellite's orbit. That was done in a matter of hours.

The Comrades bluffed around at doing the same thing, but all they could do was go through the motions. Take incentive away from anybody and you just can't deliver.

They couldn't. We did.

Funny thing too when you think it was due to the efforts of one of the most disliked of our men. Irony, maybe, but that's the way things work out sometimes.

It was just ten weeks to the day after he crashed that I was bringing the first Moon-landing ship ever built down over the plain where McGinty'd smashed up. Kolomar was co-piloting right next to me.

Yes, we found the wrecked L-8 without much trouble.

Split wide open, lunar dust spilled all over its insides, and what was left of McGinty buried under a couple of feet of it. He hadn't even put on a spacesuit.

Haliburton was with us this trip, and it was he who found the plastisheen envelope. Not so important, now.

It was young Loftus who found the note. Kolomar read it over my shoulder.

Dear Guys, Hope I didn't smash her up so bad you couldn't find this. When I busted open the safe and left my half-buck for you to find, I didn't expect to get what I got, but Colonel Kenton always said General Kolomar would follow a thief anywhere in the Universe, and that's how I had it figured, too. But anyhow, if you're reading this, then you've made them build a real Ship that can land up here O. K., and so you've got the edge. And the further out you go, the more the edge you got. Try them Martian canals for me sometime, will you? And tell that sergeant I'm sorry I had to hit him so hard. Mc.

I looked up from the note, out through the twisted wreckage, and a hundred yards away at the first Moon-landing ship ever built.

For the Comrades from now on, things were going to be a lot different.

I heard Kolomar's voice at my shoulder. There was a funny hesitation in it that I'd never heard before.

"That's—some ship, isn't it?" was all he said.

"Yes, sir," I answered, "It is." I looked down at the pile of dust that covered McGinty. "It's real first-rate."

"then the dragon came..."

Nobody tells a story like Daddy. The everyday world fades away as his words lead you into a new and shining land.

And what if the Dragon is a bit scary? You need only climb into Daddy's arms to be safe and secure again before it's time to sleep.

To make those we love safe and secure is the very core of homemaking. It is a privilege known only in a country such as ours, where men and women are free to work for it.

And taking care of our own is also the way we best take care of our country. For the strength of America is simply the strength of one secure home touching that of another.



Saving for security is easy! Here's a savings system that really works—the Payroll Savings Plan for investing in United States Savings Bonds.

This is all you do. Go to your company's pay office, choose the amount you want to save—a couple of dollars a payday, or as much as you wish. That money will be set aside for you before you even draw your pay. And automatically invested in United States Series "E" Savings Bonds which are turned over to you.

If you can save only \$3.75 a week on the Plan, in 9 years and 8 months you will have \$2,137.30.

U. S. Series "E" Savings Bonds earn interest at an average of 3% per year, compounded semiannually, when held to maturity! And they can go on earning interest for as long as 19 years and 8 months if you wish, giving you back 80% more than you put in!

For your sake, and your family's. too, how about signing up today?

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"Phone Me in Central Park"

By JAMES McCONNELL

*There should be an epitaph for every man,
big or little, but a really grand and special
one for Loner Charlie.*

CHARLES turned over on his side to look at her. She lay quietly in the other bed, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was blonde to perfection, exquisitely shaped, and the rich promise of her body was exposed to his view.

"Why?" he thought as he looked at her. "Why did it have to happen like this?"

The whole thing was still like a dream to him, and as yet he couldn't decide whether it was a good or a bad dream. A year ago she had been unattainable, a face to conjure with in erotic dreams, far beyond his ken. A year ago she had been a public idol, the most popular actress of the day. And he had been a nobody, full of a nobody's idle hopes and schemes.

And now he was lying in the bed next to hers in her swank Manhattan apartment in the most exclusive hotel in town. The unrealness of the situation overwhelmed him. His mind was a picture of confused thoughts. Meanings and answers to his questions slithered out of his reach.

"God," he said. It was not an exclamation, nor yet an expletive. It was a mere statement of fact.

A thought teased at him. Charles looked at the woman again and decided that she still looked beautiful in spite of the harshness of the room's lighting. He touched buttons by the edge of the bed and the illumination quieted to a soft glow, wrapping her in a radiant halo. Charles smiled wanly and got up. He stood by the bed looking at her.

"I could have fallen in love with you once. A year ago, perhaps, or longer. But not now. Not now." He turned away and walked to the window. "Now the world is dead. The whole world is dead."

New York lay quietly below him. It was the hour of indecision when day has not quite made up its mind to leave and night has not yet attacked in force. The streetlights were already on, making geometric patterns through the dusk of Central Park. Some of the billboards were shining, their relays activated by darkness-sensitized sole-noids. A reddish-orange pallor hung from the sky.

It had been very pleasant that afternoon. She had given of herself freely, warmly, and Charles had accepted. But then he had known that she would. It was not him, it was the circumstances. Under the circumstances, she would have given herself to any man—

"Why did it have to be her—or me? Why should it have to happen to anybody? Why!"

She would have given herself to any man—

His thoughts beat a rapid crescendo, activating emotions, stimulating sensations of angry rage. He wanted to cry, to weep angry tears of protest.

To any man, WHO HAPPENED TO BE THE LAST MAN ON EARTH!

Charles picked up a heavy book end off the table and crashed it through the thick pane of window glass.

A gust of wind from the outside breezed through the shattered opening, attacking his olfactory patch with the retching smell of decaying flesh. Charles ignored it. Even smells had lost their customary meanings.

He felt the rage build up inside again, tearing at his viscera. His stomach clenched up like an angry fist.

"But I don't want to be the last man alive!" he shouted. "I don't know what to



Illustration by Kelly Freas

do! I don't know where to go, how to act! I just don't know—"

A paroxysm of sobbing shook his body. Trembling, he dropped to his knees, his head against the cold firmness of the sill, his hands clutched tightly around the jagged edges of the window pane. In spite of the sharp pain that raced through his system, in spite of the bright, warm, red stream that trickled down his face, he knelt by the window for several minutes.

"*Maybe I'm not the last!*"

The thought struck him with suddenness, promisingly, edged with swelling comfort to fill his emptiness.

Charles got up slowly, noticing for the first time that his fingers were badly cut. He wrapped a handkerchief around them and forgot them. He had to know—he had to find out.

AS HE turned to leave, he noticed again the woman lying in radiant state upon the bed. He walked to her side and leaned over, kissing her gently on the forehead. As he straightened up, his leg caught against her arm, pushing it slightly. The woman's arm slipped from its position and dangled from the edge of the bed like a crazy pendulum. Charles picked it up and folded it across her now cold breasts. He started to pull the sheet over her nude form, then stopped, smiling at his conventionality. After all, it didn't make any difference now.

The phonograph was near the door. On sudden impulse he switched it on, turned the volume up full, and in grim jest left it playing Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead* on full automatic. The music haunted him down the hall to the elevator that he had to run himself.

The lobby was littered with debris, human and otherwise. Charles ignored it. The street that led towards the Bureau of Vital Statistics was a mess of desolate carnage. Charles overlooked it. Shop fronts smashed, stores looted, gyro-cars wrecked, proud buildings defaced.

"That was it," he said to himself. "Pride. We called this the 'Proud Era.' Everything was better and bigger and nicer to have. Buildings were taller, men were healthier, most of the problems of humanity seemed licked, or nearly so. It was a time of free

power, each small unit of population, each section of town operating on perpetual, ever-lasting, automatic atomic piles.

"We were free. We seemed, almost, to have accomplished something. The world was running well. No wonder we called it the 'Proud Era.' Life was fun, just a bowl of cherries, until . . ."

Two years ago the animals had started dying. Strangely enough the rats had gone first, to anybody's notice. Sales of poison dropped, scientific laboratories chained to a perpetual rodent-cycle began to complain bitterly.

Then the lovers who hunted out and haunted the lonely lanes through the countryside began to remark that the locusts were late that year. The Southern states joyously reported that mosquito control was working to an unprecedented degree. The largest cotton crop ever was forecast and rumors from Mexico had it that no one had died from scorpion bite in several weeks.

A month later the meat animals, the birds and the household pets began dropping as rapidly as the flies which had dropped earlier. Congress was called into special session, as were all of the national governments around the world. The U. N. met at emergency sessions to cope with the situation. The president of the world-wide Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals committed suicide.

Within a year it was obvious to everyone that man was the only animal left on earth.

The panic which had begun with the death of the animals was quieted somewhat by the fact that humans seemed immune to the pandemic. But the lakes full of dead fish caused a great stink and residents along the coasts began to move inland. Sales of perfumes and deodorants soared.

Then just one year ago, the first human became infected with the strange malady. Within six months, half of the world's population was gone. Less than a month ago no more than a few thousand people remained in New York. And now . . .

"I've got to find out," Charles told himself. He meant it, of course, but in a sense he was afraid—afraid that his trip to the Bureau might give him an answer he didn't dare listen to. "But I've got to try." He walked on down the bloody street.

Before the plague the Bureau of Vital Statistics had been one of man's crowning achievements. Housed as it was in a huge metallic globe of a building, it contained computers which kept exact account of every human on earth.

Compulsory registration and the classification of each individual by means of the discrete patterns of his brain waves had accomplished for man what no ordinary census could have. The machine knew who was alive, who was dead, and where everybody was.

Once a year the Bureau issued The Index, an exact accounting of Earth's four billion inhabitants. Four billion names and addresses, compressed into microprint, a tremendous achievement even for the "Proud Era." In all of his life, Charles had never once glanced at The Index. The average person had little necessity to do so since the Bureau information service would answer questions free of charge at any time.

Reaching the gigantic building, Charles pushed aside the body of a young man and walked into the main foyer. Passing behind once-guarded doors, he entered the giant computer room and paused in admiration.

ONLY once, before the plague, had he seen the interior of this room. But he still remembered it and he still recalled the powerful emotional experience it had been those many years ago.

All children had to have a brain-wave recording made by the Bureau during the first month of their life. And again at the age of 10 each child returned to the Bureau for a recheck. It was for this latter recording that Charles had come to the Bureau some twenty-two years before and a friendly guard had let him peep briefly into the computer room. The impression of intense activity, of organized confusion, of mechanical wonder had remained with him the rest of his life.

"So different now," he thought, surveying the room. "Now it's empty, so empty." The machine seemed to reflect the stillness, the very deadness of the world. The silence became unbearable.

Charles walked to the master control panel. With newly acquired dexterity he switched the computer screens on and

watched them glow to life. All around the world sensitive receiving stations pulsed to activity, sending out searching fingers, hunting for elusive patterns of neutral energy, mapping and tabulating the results.

The main computer screen dominated one wall of the room. Other smaller screens clustered around it. On these screens could be graphed the population of any and every part of the globe. An illuminated counter immediately above it would give the numerical strength of the area being sampled while the screen would show population density by individual pinpoints of light that merged to form brightness patterns.

"I'll try New York first," he said to himself, knowing that he was a coward, afraid to check the whole world from the start. "I'll start with New York and work up."

Charles activated the switches that would flash a schematic map of New York on the screen. "There's bound to be somebody else left here. After all, there were at least twenty of us just a couple of days ago." And one of them, a beautiful woman, had invited him up to her apartment, not because she liked him, but because . . .

The main screen focused itself, the patterns shifting into a recognizable perceptual image.

"Why, it was just yesterday (or was it the day before?) that ten of us, at least, met here to check the figures. There were lots of us alive then." Including the blond young woman who had died just this afternoon . . .

Charles stopped talking and forced his eyes upwards. Peripheral vision caught first the vague outlines of the lower part of the map. His eyes continued to move, slowly, reluctantly. They caught the over-all relief of Greater New York City—and then concentrated on the single, shining dot at the very heart of the map—and he understood.

His eyes stabbed quickly for the counter above the screen.

One.

He gasped.

The counter read *one*.

Charles was by himself, the last person alive in all of New York City.

He began to tremble violently. The silence of the room began to press quickly in on him. His frantic fingers searched for the computer controls.

New York State. One.

The entire United States. One.

The western hemisphere, including islands.

(Was that a point of light in Brazil? No. Just a ghost image).

One.

The Pacific area, Asia, Australia, Asia Minor, Russia and the Near East, Africa and then Europe.

England!

There was a light in England! Someone else still lived! The counter clicked forward.

Two!

His trembling stopped. He breathed again.

"Of course. London was at least as populous as New York City before the plague. It's only logical that—"

He stopped. For even as he spoke, the light winked out! The counter clicked again.

One.

Alone.

Alone!

Charles screamed.

The bottom dropped out from under him!

Why?

Such a simple question, but in those three letters lay the essence of human nature. Why. The drive of curiosity. Stronger, in a way, than the so-called "basic" drives: hunger, thirst, sex, shelter, warmth, companionship, elimination. Certainly more decisive in the history of the race. Man began to think, to differentiate himself from the other animals, when he first asked the question: "Why?"

But thinking about "why" didn't answer the question itself, Charles thought. He looked around him. He was sitting on a bench in Central Park, alone except for a few stray corpses. But the park was fairly free of bodies.

"You've got about ten minutes warning," he said to himself. "I guess that most people wanted to die inside of something—inside of anything. Not out in the unprotected open."

The silence was like a weight hanging around his neck. Not an insect noise, not the chirp of a bird, not the sound of a car nor the scream of a plane. Not even a breeze to whisper among the leaves, he thought.

Civilization equals life equals noise. Silence equals . . .

Why. His mind kept returning to the question. Of all the people on earth, me. The last. Why me?

Average, that's what he was. Height: 5'11". Weight: 165. Age: 32. Status: Married, once upon a time.

The Norm, with no significant departures, all down the line. Church member, but not a good one. Could that be it? Could the most normal be the most perfect? Had he led the best of all possible lives? Was that it? Had God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, spared his life, saved him, singled him out because he was most nearly a saint, most nearly Christ-like, most nearly . . .

Lies— His mind snapped back to reality. He half smiled. Saint? Christ? The Second Coming?

He was no saint.

Charles sighed.

What about—?

CHANCE. That was it! The laws of probability, the bell-shaped curve, normal distribution, rectilinear regression. More people per square foot in New York than elsewhere. The first person who died was from New York, so the last person who gave way to the disease should come from here too. Spin the wheel; throw the dice; toss the coin.

So simple to explain by the laws of chance. No need for any underlying assumptions about good and evil, no need for teleological arguments concerning cause and effect. Simply explain it by chance. Somebody had to be the last to go and that was—

"No," Charles said, standing up in the quiet of the spring evening. "No, chance won't do it. No man can reckon with chance. The mind rejects such things. There must be something beyond mere accident. There must be!"

He sighed slowly.

"So now I'm a hermit, whether or not I like it," he said in derision to the gravel path as he walked along it. "A hermit in the midst of a city of millions of— No, I forgot. There aren't any more people, are there?" It was hard to realize, even now. "A hermit, alone—and I haven't even got a cave . . ."

Charles stopped walking suddenly. No cave, he thought. No place to sleep out the long one, no place to rest while time came to change things around and make them for the better. No place to hide.

And suddenly it was the most important thing in life to him to find his "cave."

It took him almost an hour to find the proper tools, and better than two hours more of hard, nighttime work to get the hole dug to his satisfaction. It took almost three hours to find the right sort of casket, durable but not too heavy for one man to handle. He carted it out to a grassy plot close to the center of the park where the grave was. He let the coffin down slowly into the depression, then piled up loose dirt on the sloping sides of the hole so that the rain would wash it down over him.

"I can't very well bury myself," he said. "I guess it will rain after I'm gone." He looked carefully down at the metallic container.

Wait now. There was something wrong, something missing. It was—oh, yes, he caught it. It was the stone. There wasn't any stone to go at the head of the grave. "I'll have to fix that."

A sheet of metal, bent double, served for the monument proper. A nearby tool shed yielded up a can of paint and a brush. By the glow of one of the streetlights Charles worked out the inscription.

"It ought to be something impressive," he thought out loud. "Something fitting the occasion."

What did one say on these situations? There was so little chance to practice up for things like this. But it ought to be good, it ought to be proper.

"In this now hallowed corner of the planet Earth—' No. That sounds too . . . too . . ."

Make it simple, he thought. And he finally wrote:

HERE LIES THE BODY OF
THE LAST MAN ON EARTH

Yes. That was it. Simple. Let whoever came afterwards figure out the rest. Let them decide. He smiled and finished the painting.

Charles was hungry. He got up and started for one of the restaurants near the

park. Later on, when there was more time, he'd find a piece of granite and move it to the plot. He could spend his free time carving on it, copying the inscription. He would make it into a real shrine; maybe he would practice up a bit and try to carve a statue to go with the stone.

Somehow, though, since things were ready and it didn't make too much difference, it seemed to Charles that he'd probably have a long time to wait. "Maybe it's just a disease, and I'm immune. I was immune to smallpox. The vaccination never took. That's probably it."

He smiled. Strange, but now he wanted very much to go on living, alone or not. There were things he could do, ways to keep occupied. He wouldn't mind it so much. But he wanted more and more desperately with each passing second to retain his foothold on the tenuous path of physical existence.

The tantalizing thought of "why" puzzled its way back into his mind. But it seemed less pressing now that he had almost come to the conclusion that he would live for a long time. Later, in a few days perhaps, he would think about it. In a little while he'd have plenty of opportunity for hunting down the answer. This seemed good to him, for now he thought he almost had the answer, if there were an answer. He thought he had seen the solution peering out at him from the recesses of his mind, and he didn't like the expression on its face. Better to forget.

CHARLES reached the broad boulevard. There was a large cafe just across from him, its front window caved in by a large truck. He stumbled and almost fell as he stepped from the curb.

"Look at me, nervous as a cat."

He was trembling noticeably as he started across the street.

"I—" He started to say something, to think something. But some hidden part of his mind clamped down, obscuring the thought, rejecting the concept.

The tremor turned to a shake before he reached the far curb, and the first burst of wild pain came as he laid his shoulder against the door to the restaurant. This was the way the plague began, but— His mind

quickly repressed the idea. It couldn't be the plague. He was immune!

Another burst of pulsating, shattering pain crashed through his body, tearing down the defenses of his mind, putting an end of this thoughts of immunity. Colors flared before his eyes, a persistent, irresistible *sus-sus* flooded his ears.

He wanted to protest, but there was no one to listen to him. He appealed to every divinity he knew, all the time knowing it would be useless. His body, out of his voluntary control, tried to run off in all directions at once.

Charles struggled to end his body's disorganized responses, to channelize all his energy into one direction. His mind came back into action. He set up his goal; everything else seemed irrelevant: he had to get back to the park, to his hermit's cave, to his long, narrow home. He couldn't die until then.

Ten minutes.

He was allotted ten minutes before the end.

It could have been ten years or ten seconds, for now objective time meant nothing to him. It was not a matter of measuring seconds and minutes. It was a matter of forgetting time and measuring space.

He concentrated on the grave; he forced his body to become an unwilling machine. While he could, he walked, forcing himself on. When his legs gave way, he crawled. When his knees buckled, he rolled. When his stomach protested, he vomited. It made no difference.

Charles refused to think. Machines, especially half-broken machines, do not think; they only work. Sweating, straining, bleeding, retching, he pushed himself towards his goal, trying to add one final touch of grace and custom to the rude irrationalness of it all.

His eyes gave out a few feet from the pit. He felt his way towards it. Convulsions shook his body like a cat shakes a captive mouse. He humped his body forward between the seizures, hands outstretched, searching for grave.

And then he was upon it. One arm reached out for grass, and clutched bare space instead.

He was home.

He gathered energy from his final reservoirs of strength for one final movement that would throw him headlong into the shallow grave. He tensed his muscles, pulled his limbs up under him and started to roll into the hole.

Instantly the thought struck him with paralyzing devastation. The answer to it all poked its face out from the recesses of his mind and sapped the last bit of his energy, corroding his nerves and dying muscles. Now he knew, and the knowing was the end of it.

He collapsed at the edge of the pit. Only one arm hung loosely down into it, swinging senseless in the air, pointing accusingly at the empty coffin.

The world will end, not with a bang, nor with a whimper, but with the last man's anguished cry at the unreasonableness of it all.

Charles screamed.

THE large, invisible, ovular being that hung suspended over the Empire State Building rested from its exertion. Soon it was approached by another of its kind.

"It is finished?" asked the second.

"Yes. Just now. I am resting."

"I can feel the emptiness of it."

"It was very good. Where were you?"

"On the next planet out. No beauty to it at all; no system. How was yours?"

"Beautiful," said the first. "It went according to the strictest semantic relationship following the purest mathematical principles. They made it easy for me."

"Good."

"Well, where to now?"

"There's another system about four thoughts away. We're due there soon."

"All right. Let's go."

"What's that you have there?"

"Oh, this?" replied the first. "It's a higher neural order compendium the Things here made up. It's what I used."

"You can't take it with you, you know. They don't allow souvenirs."

"I know."

"Well?"

"All right, all right. You're so good, see if you can compute the scatter probability."

The first being moved imperceptibly and the heavy plastoid binding of the book dis-

appeared. The thousands of pages dropped softly, caught at the wind like hungry sails, separated, and pulled by the fingers of gravity, went their disparate ways.

Here a page scuttled into a broken window of the Chrysler Building (read the names: Aabat, Aabbs, Aabbt).

Here a page landed upright on the head of one of the library lions and sloughed softly to the ground (read the names: Looman, Loomana, Loomanabsky).

Here another page crept in between the cracks of a pier on the riverfront, dropping gently to the caressing eddies of the water (read the names: Smith, Smitha, Smitj).

And here two pages danced down into Central Park, pirouetted, promenaded, and finally came to rest against a propped-up piece of metal (read the names: Whit, Whita, Whitacomb).

It was not until the dusty morning sun stirred up the breezes that they fluttered down into the shallow hole beneath, unnoticed. The writing on the metal, until then partially obscured by the papers, became legible:

HERE LIES THE BODY OF
THE LAST MAN ON EARTH—
CHARLES J. ZYZYST
GO TO HELL!

HELP NOW!

RESEARCH WILL WIN

Join the March of Dimes

THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION
FOR INFANTILE PARALYSIS

FIGHT
INFANTILE
PARALYSIS

FRANKLIN
D. ROOSEVELT



HEX ON HAX

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Trickery . . . Indirection . . . Subtlety—these were the watchwords of the Grand BIA. But what human ingenuity can hide, human ingenuity can uncover.

"LET me offer my congratulations," Morgan said. "You've passed all the tests splendidly."

Phillips suppressed a sigh of relief and shook the bureau chief's hand.

"Have a seat," Morgan said. "You're almost a part of the BIA now. I suppose you'd be interested in some of our little secrets?"

Phillips kept his face sternly indifferent. Naturally he was interested. The secrets of the Bureau of Interplanetary Affairs were enough to maintain Terra's ascendancy in the Galactic South, and to implement Terran policy without recourse to war.

But Morgan had said that he was *almost* in. His final acceptance depended upon Morgan. Would this interview be in the nature of a final, oral examination?

Phillips said stiffly, "I wouldn't presume to—to—"

"It's quite all right," Morgan said. "You're security-cleared. But you mustn't expect too much. We're basically simple men here at BIA, and our devices are correspondingly simple."

That was frankly unbelievable. Was it part of a test? Phillips studied Morgan's square, honest face, trying to discover hidden ironies.

"But somehow," Morgan mused, "our little devices are rarely discovered until too late. Even though they're quite obvious."

"Like the Trojan Horse?" Phillips blurted out.

Morgan smiled. "Heard of that one, have you?"

Phillips nodded.

"But do you know how it works?"

"No."

"Really quite simple," Morgan told him.

"We're using it now on Balthash. Do you know that planet? A dictator entrenched himself there about sixteen years ago. A sizeable underground has been trying to overthrow him and establish a representative government. Terra would like to aid them, for Balthash is strategically located. But we can't interfere directly."

"Of course not," Phillips said, knowing what politics were like in the Galactic South.

"The best we can do is send their dictator a statue to commemorate his birthday. Our code name for the statue is Trojan Horse."

"And weapons are concealed inside it?" Phillips asked.

Morgan shrugged his shoulders.

"They would have to be," Phillips mused, wondering if *this* was a test. "But it can't be too hard to search one statue."

"It shouldn't be," Morgan said indifferently.

IT WAS an heroic statue of Leader Hax, sculptured in the Terran style. Twice life size it stood, showing a glorified Hax with a sword in his right hand and a loaf of bread in his left. It was of carbon steel and tungsten, built to last a millenium.

Some races might have considered it beautiful.

"Very bad taste," Security Chief Thallag murmured as he walked around its gigantic base.

Behind him walked his secretary and his chief engineer.

"Bad taste. But that's to be expected of Terrans."

His secretary said something about looking gift statues in the teeth, and Thallag raised an eyebrow. As Security Chief, it was his job to look gift statues in the teeth. To

look everything in the teeth, as a matter of fact.

On the base of the statue was an inscription in Classical English.

"To the people of Balthash," the engineer read aloud. "From the people of Terra, in commemoration of the fiftieth birthday of Leader Hax."

Thallag's secretary, who was a subtle woman, smiled. Thallag, who was even subtler, did not smile.

"A neighborly gesture," Thallag said. "Imagine Terra sending us this lovely statue."

"Could it be a good-will offering?" the engineer asked. He blushed when Thallag turned to stare at him.

"Stick to wiring diagrams," he said. "Why should Terra offer its good will to Leader Hax?"

The engineer scratched his head. He was dimly aware that Terra disapproved of Leader Hax.

"Then why did they send the statue?" he asked slowly.

"Ah!" Thallag said. "That's what we must discover!"

And the answer was obvious, he decided. Terra was still trying to aid the Balthasan underground, hoping to unseat Hax. But overt interference was frowned upon in the Galactic South.

But trickery—indirection—

The rebels desperately needed electronic weapons. Terra had them, but had been unable to smuggle any through Balthasan customs.

And here was a statue, arriving just two days before Hax's birthday.

"I want you to inspect this thing," Thallag said to his engineer. "Inspect it with a microscope, if necessary. Look behind every molecule. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," the engineer said. He cleared his throat. "Sir, if this thing looks suspicious, why not ship it back to Terra?"

Thallag's secretary smiled at this naivete. Thallag shook his head wearily.

"Let me play with politics," he said. "You find me the hidden weapons. I expect you to have every one of them by tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir," the engineer said, and hurried away.

"He means well," Thallag said to his secretary, back in his office.

"I suppose so," his secretary said.

"He's thorough," Thallag said with certainty. "I'll say that much for the idiot. He'll find whatever Terra hid there."

"It's really a pity you can't send the statue back," his secretary said.

"I wouldn't want to," Thallag told her, walking to the window. Below him, in the courtyard, workmen were preparing a pedestal for the statue. Behind the courtyard loomed the gray mass of Hax's palace.

"I think we can use this statue," Thallag said. "Besides, if we shipped it back, Terra would scream all over the Galactic South that her peaceful gesture was rebuffed. The Leader wouldn't like that."

His secretary nodded sagely as she fussed with her hair.

"Also," Thallag said in a low voice, "Leader Hax likes the statue. He considers it a very good likeness."

Neither of them smiled.

"If the Terrans did hide weapons in it," his secretary said slowly, "do you really think you can find them? They know that the statue will be inspected."

Thallag stared gloomily out the window at Leader Hax's palace. Then he grinned. "Come, come," he said. "Terrans are flesh and blood and brain, just like the rest of us. What human ingenuity can hide, human ingenuity can discover."

"I hope so," his secretary said.

PHILLIPS thought over his list of possible solutions. Morgan slumped easily in his chair, looking pleasantly unofficial.

"I think I know," Phillips said slowly. "There are no weapons in the statue!"

Morgan rubbed the back of his neck, but gave no other sign.

"It's very clever," Phillips said, smiling at his own ingenuity in discovering the secret. "You know the Balthasan Security would find anything you hid in the statue. Therefore you hide nothing. They search in vain. They get nervous. They think that Terra has engineering methods beyond their knowledge. Leader Hax doesn't know what to do. His uncertainty is communicated to his followers. Then, when the rebels attack—"

"That's very good," Morgan said. "Almost Machiavellian."

Phillips smiled modestly.

"But tell me," Morgan asked, "how do you think the underground feels when no weapons are forthcoming?"

"Well—I should think—" Phillips closed his mouth with a snap, and wished he had never opened it.

"Psychology is a weapon that cuts two ways," Morgan said. "Besides, having no weapons in the statue is too subtle for simple men like us."

"You mean that there is something hidden there?"

"Disappoints you, doesn't it?" Morgan said. "But you're thinking in terms of literature, not life. Your way would make fitting storybook justice. The dictator who rules by fear, conquered by fear. But unfortunately, things aren't arranged so nicely. In life, force must usually be met with force."

"Hmm," Phillips said, not sure if Morgan was being completely honest with him. "If there are weapons concealed in the statue, I don't see why they can't find them."

"Perhaps they will," Morgan said. "As I said, it's basically a simple scheme."

Thallag's engineer was no actor. He always looked exactly as he felt. Now he stood in front of the Security Chief's desk, shuffling his feet and avoiding Thallag's look.

"Well, what did you find?" Thallag asked.

"Plenty," the engineer said. "It's in the body of the statue, behind concealed panels." He looked unhappy about the whole thing.

"What's the matter, then?" Thallag asked him.

"There was no reason to hide it. It's no good," the engineer stated, meeting Thallag's eye for the first time.

"Explain," Thallag said.

"Oh, it looks real enough. They've got power equipment in there, transistors, circuits—but no one could build a weapon out of it."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course," the engineer said in a flat, certain voice. "I know modern weapons. The underground could buy junk like that in any supply store, even without a permit.

But no conceivable weapon could be built out of it."

"That's very interesting," Thallag said. "Why would Terra smuggle equipment that the underground doesn't need?" He put his fingers lightly together.

The only logical assumption was that the Terrans expected the equipment to be found.

They *knew* it would be found.

Their scheme was more involved than that.

"And you found nothing else?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Then you missed something," Thallag smiled grimly. "I'll stake your life on it. You have about eighteen hours to find whatever you missed."

"But sir, I inspected every possible—"

"Try the impossible, then. I guarantee you'll find more. You must."

"Yes, sir," the engineer said wearily.

"You know how small electronic weapons can be. They could hide the components anywhere."

"The X-ray didn't show anything. But I'll try again."

"Good," Thallag said pleasantly. "And I wish you luck."

Without being told, his secretary marked the engineer's name on a list of possible subversives.

Thallag spent the rest of the day checking the security measures for the Leader's birthday.

Hax telephoned him later. The Leader was still delighted with his statue. He liked the representation of the features, the demi-god proportions. It was how he liked being thought of.

And he liked the materials that it was built of; materials that would last eternally, as he knew his dynasty would.

"Pull its teeth," he said to Thallag. "Get all the weapons out of it. Then wipe out the underground."

"Yes, sir," Thallag said. The Leader hung up, and Thallag slammed the telephone down.

As easy as that. Just pull its teeth, and wipe out the underground.

Angrily he stared at the massive gray palace. That damned engineer, he thought.

If he didn't find the weapons he'd have the man killed by centimeters . . . as Hax would have him killed if anything went wrong.

BEFORE midnight the engineer returned to his office, grimy but triumphant.

"Found them, sir," he said.

In his soiled hands he held the almost microscopic components of twenty electronic guns.

"Good man," Thallag said, feeling the blood stir again in his veins. "Tell me about it. Have a chair."

"Finest hiding job I've ever seen," the engineer said, putting the components on Thallag's desk. "First I re-checked the equipment in the statue. No weapons there."

"I'll make you a general," Thallag said.

His secretary silently scratched the engineer's name from the list of possible subversives.

"Even these basic components were disassembled," the engineer said, "and hidden in segments."

"Where were they?"

"The first I found was in the pupil of the left eyeball of the statue. If I hadn't probed it on a hunch I might not have found any of them. After that, I proceeded on the assumption that the most unlikely areas would be the most likely. I found segments in the earlobes, the fingernails, and the tongue. And to make sure, I probed every cubic inch of the thing."

"That's like the Terrans," Thallag said.

"Very like them. You're sure there's nothing more?"

"If anything else is found I will personally eat it."

"You'll have to," Thallag said. "Now go and have a drink. That's an order."

The engineer saluted and hurried out.

"I do believe," Thallag said. "That they have out-manuevered themselves. What time is it?"

"One-fifteen," his secretary said.

"The presentation is at nine," Thallag said. "And according to my sources, the rebels will try to take the weapons tonight. After that, they'll attack in force."

His secretary smiled wanly, seeing the plan already.

"So be it," Thallag said. "But let's make a few preparations for them."

His secretary nodded.

Thallag thought for a moment. "Do you know," he said, "I don't see how the weapons would help them against a disciplined army."

He stared at the components on his desk.

"I really don't. Perhaps they counted on an element of surprise," Thallag said. "Well, to work. And the statue is still absurd, esthetically."

His secretary nodded.

Phillips sat silently for a few moments after Morgan told him.

"So that's how it works," he said, finally.

"That's it. As simple and obvious as that. They want a concealed trick. We give it to them. Then they want another, even more cleverly concealed trick. We give them that, too. And that usually satisfies them. Then—"

"But really," Phillips protested. "It's obvious, once you look at it."

"I know it," Morgan said. "I know it so well. As a part of the BIA, you'll just have to learn to leave subtlety to others."

Phillips opened his mouth to speak, and then realized what Morgan had said. He was *in*. He tried to think of something appropriate to say.

"Our schemes are so obvious," Morgan sighed. He grinned frankly at Phillips.

"But they work."

THE courtyard in front of Hax's palace was dark. Deep shadows were thrown by the walls, soaring a hundred feet above the ground. Shadows were thrown by the imperial buildings, mounting above the walls.

In the courtyard the statue was alone and silent.

Starlight glittered feebly along the edge of the upraised sword.

"I wish they'd hurry," Thallag muttered to his secretary. "It's chilly."

The normal complement of guards paced slowly along the walls, and the color guard stood at the gate. But the courtyard was deserted.

"Where is that underground?" Thallag said. "Could someone have warned them?"

"Look," his secretary whispered.

Blackness moved against blackness. A lump of blackness slid along the edge of the wall, moving in from the street. Another lump followed it.

"That's two," Thallag whispered, adjusting his earphones. "Where are the rest of them?"

"They must be in the street," his secretary whispered back. "Waiting for a signal."

There was a faint sound of metal against metal, and the two lumps of darkness froze.

"Go tell those clumsy idiots to be quiet," Thallag whispered furiously. "Tell them to hold their fire until I give the signal. We want to get all of them."

She moved silently away.

Thallag watched the shadows approach the statue. Then he heard static in his earphones.

"Here it is," one shadow murmured to another. Thallag's superb amplifying system brought the sound clearly into his earphones.

"Right. Are the others ready?"

"Yes. Hurry up. Give the word."

"One-two-eight-nine-four," the man said.

"Horses, dogs, purple, eighty, man, pigs."

Thallag thought, all that just to open a secret panel.

"Go ahead," the man said "You've got the rest of it."

"Red, green, scream," the second man said. "Horrible, fast, jump."

"It's open," the first man said. "Plug it in."

Thallag stared down at them. For one horrible moment he considered the possibility that the engineer had overlooked something.

But that was impossible.

But what were they doing to the components within? To the power equipment and transistors and circuits. What?

There was a clang of metal, and the statue stepped nimbly off the platform. It hesitated a moment, then began to stride toward the palace, its tons of dense metal shaking the courtyard.

"Now, now!" one of the men shouted, and Thallag's sensitive amplifying system blasted it into his ears.

The statue gathered speed and headed for the main door. The color guard had time for three frenzied shots which glanced harmlessly off the monster's chest. Then they were mashed into the door.

The statue went through the thick door like a mailed fist through paper.

And the courtyard was alive with men, running, shouting, screaming. Projectiles from simple chemical reaction weapons showered the guards on the walls before they could use their own, vastly more effective arms.

And more men poured into the courtyard, bearing down on the smashed door. Thallag thought that half the population of the city must be there. And the rest were outside, to judge from the roar.

His soldiers were waiting. Thallag's finger was poised over the alarm button, but for one precious, irreplaceable second he couldn't drive it home.

One part of his mind was considering how obvious it really was. Those simple components within the statue, that you couldn't build an electronic weapon from. . . . To examine every inch of a machine, but not question its total function!

The other part of his mind was watching the gigantic carbon steel and tungsten man smashing through the palace, effortlessly killing guards, roaming the corridors, unkillable, bearing a sword and a loaf of bread, searching for a man who wore its face.

THE VIOLATORS

By EANDO BINDER

Some wonderful odds and ends of Mother Earth had escaped the fiery incinerator of Time. And the most significant of all—metallic, angular and ancient—Lem Starglitter Blake carried proudly in his dirty old prospector's bag.

HE WAS excited, the little man with the big find.

He drove his battered old space tub down at the world which lay frozen over and lifeless since long ago. But not completely abandoned. Far from it.

He joined the long line of ships making the pilgrimage to the ancient, original home of the human race. Below lay a transparent dome, the largest Z-model of 100,000 capacity, into whose ample entry locks the ships filed down, one by one. Some had to circle, waiting their turn. He licked his lips impatiently. At times he grinned and savored the delay, in view of what lay ahead.

At last he chugged in and parked his grimy little tub beside shiny yachts and towering spaceliners and spacebuses. The canned air of the dome was fresh to his lungs, compared to the reek of his cabin. He dug a tip out of his frayed jeans for the parking attendant, not quite daring to snub him. He winced at the sneer over the small coin.

But no more sneers like that, soon. And plenty more money, with what he had in his bag. He smiled and mumbled as he walked away, swinging the leather bag at his side, bulging with something angular.

He filed his way among others toward the turnstiles leading to the main exhibit area. Tourists, vacationers, families with kids, school groups, newsmen, galactic trotters, earnest scholars. You could find all types here, from every walk of life and from any distant planet, drawn like a magnet to this "must" for all travelers. It was *the* sight to see around the Milky Way.

Certainly nothing could beat its appeal as the birthplace of mankind. Nothing, that is, except the gay and fabulous Carnival of

Castor, whose attendance record could never be topped.

He tried to rush through the turnstile but was halted by the green-clad guard.

"I'm in a hurry, mister," he mumbled in his wispy voice, from an oxygen-burned throat. He began opening his bag. "Look what I found—"

The guard heard not a word. "We keep a register of all visitors to Mother Earth. Name? Home World? Occupation?"

It was odd how even the guard's routine voice lowered a tone on the words "Mother Earth."

"Lem Starglitter Blake," said the little old man in unkempt jeans and patched boots.

The guard's lip twitched slightly. Lem Blake wished he had left out the middle name. Why had parents of that generation taken to such frothy names? Red-faced, Blake went on with a rush. "Born on Antares IV. Prospector for ore strikes. But listen, I made the biggest strike of all. Not ore but—"

"Next," said the guard.

Lem Blake swallowed the rest and moved on. People wouldn't treat him that way later, he consoled himself in secret gloating, clutching his bag. He could take it for a short time more without bitterness.

Another guard eyed the bag sternly. "I must warn you, sir, there is no souvenir hunting allowed here. Understand, sir?"

"I'm not going to take anything," Blake tried to protest. "I'm bringing something—"

"Your bag will be emptied and examined when you leave," dismissed the guard.

They were all so big and important in their flashy uniforms. But just wait,



Illustration by Joseph Eberle

thought Blake, just wait. We'll see who's big and important later.

But Blake could see why they were so cautious. All around, enclosed in the giant plastic bubble, were the hoary ruins of a city, moldered to fragility. If the hordes of visitors were allowed to snatch souvenirs, the place would be picked clean as a bone.

ANCIENT NEW YORK, said a sign, MAIN CITY OF HOME EARTH IN PRE-SPACE DAYS.

People stared in the proper awe due such time-honored relics of antique glory. It was from this terribly old civilization that the race of starmen had sprung, inheriting the galaxy. Various individual exhibits among the ruins were labeled—a broken wheel, a shred of tapestry under glass, a coil of wire, pottery, bits of jewelry, a bleached human skull. Odds and ends that had escaped the incinerator of time. There wasn't much left after 140 rock-wearing centuries.

Priceless, those few dozens of relics. Lem Blake grew excited again at what lay in his bag. It would command a price, maybe enough to stake him to years of good food, new clothes, his tub overhauled, leisure and fun. Maybe more, much more. It all depended.

Blake knew all the busy guards would ignore him. He must reach higher authority. He hurried to the central auditorium where the staff lecturer spoke sonorously to the hushed crowd packed shoulder to elbow. Blake took a long breath at the outer fringes and began squeezing his way closer to the rostrum. It was slow work in the human jam. He heard the speech as he struggled on.

"—though today we are born and live and die on many worlds, my fellow humans, we all come from the original stock of this particular planet. It was from this small and quite backward 20th century world that mankind leaped to the stars."

Lem Blake suddenly choked on a chuckling thought in the dead quiet of the listening throng. A circle of eyes transfixed him at the unspeakable crime. Mumbling apologies, Blake pressed on.

Professor John Nova McKay went on with the stock lecture. How many times had it been repeated now, some 80,000? He himself had delivered it over a thousand

times. It was hard to keep the monotony out of his tones.

"Ships roared into space at the end of the 20th century. First, to explore and pioneer on nearby worlds of the same sun. By the 25th century, they had the Hyper Drive, permitting speeds greater than light. Then began the second phase of building a galactic commonwealth. Those were days of glory."

The speaker tried to lift his voice on those words but it fell flat in his own ears. But the audience hung on it, caught in the dramatic thought that their own feet stood where all that had started.

"This is all ancient space history going back 14,000 years, and many of its details and records are lost. But we know that by the 30th century we humans ranged all through the Milky Way, settling, colonizing, setting up trade with native races. Worlds existed in vast numbers, many habitable."

Blake stopped muttering apologies as he elbowed his way inch by inch. The apologies drew frosty frowns, and were the last thing they wanted. They wanted silence. Only Blake's bag insisted on clanking now and then. He kept on doggedly.

Professor McKay's voice rolled over the rapt faces. "Today, there are over a million commonwealth planets, about half under native rule, friendly to us. On the other half no native intelligence survived, and they thus became our own home planets. Earthmen came to dominate the galaxy but only in the sense that they were the single largest and most prolific race."

McKay's dry voice quickened now, as the most unique part of the stock historical story came at last. "But strangely, during that era of galactic expansion, Earth itself gradually faded out of the picture. More and more people left, seeking better homes, richer opportunities, more desirable locations and neighborhoods in the galaxy. Population fell on Earth.

"This was all hastened and brought to a focus when the sun of Earth suddenly began dimming in the 49th century. An old star, that sun died. In a short time, by the cosmic clock, another ice age fell on Earth—the final one. The oceans froze solid and all land areas turned to bleak wasteland."

There was a suitable pause at this point

for the audience to weigh that calamitous event. People stood hushed, half in ancient sorrow.

Blake stopped, hardly daring to breathe. One clank now and he might be thrown out.

"Of course, long before the final death of the planet, the last Earthmen had left for other waiting homes. There was no swift storylike doom. No panic or hardship or loss of life. And then, perhaps inevitably but still queerly, Earth receded in all human memory and was forgotten."

The speaker paused again. It always came on cue here, a gasp from the audience, as certainly as the "ahs" and "ohs" of a fireworks display. The bald statement always had its shock effect on any audience, and here on hallowed Earth itself.

Lem Starglitter Blake resumed his slow progress toward the rostrum, glad for the noise.

PROFESSOR MCKAY braced himself, winced, and went on. Who had written the original purple prose for the lecture? Yet it could not be changed now. Not without an act of the Galactic Congress.

"Yes, Mother Earth was forgotten and abandoned as it floated frozen and lifeless about its dying primary. Forlorn, deserted. Nobody came to visit Earth any more, for any reason. Nor any of its sister planets, as they too were sheathed in ice. Earth became a ghost world.

"And as centuries marched on, with humanity busy on many thriving worlds, all records were lost as to where Earth might be. Earth fell into the category of a vague legend, known only to be a frozen globe circling a sun once typed G-O. But there were a hundred such. Which one was Earth's sun? Nobody knew any more."

Blake stepped on somebody's toes and was roundly cursed. But he kept on, clutching his bag. They'd be sorry. All this would change when he showed what he had.

"Imagine it, friends. By the 100th century, even the name 'Earth' had faded from collective memory. Most humans living and dying on the worlds of Arcturus, Vega, Pollux or any others didn't even know that the race had come from Earth originally. They almost thought themselves native life. We no longer called ourselves Earthmen

by then. That term fell into discard too. We were Starmen. And so, for an age, lonely Earth was lost in space, unsung, unknown, unhallowed."

McKay went on by rote, thinking of dinner.

"It was not till the 130th century that the Galactic Historical Society decided to make a shrine of Mother Earth, original home of the Starmen, as turned up in a musty record. But where *was* Earth? Vague records helped nothing. Picture how aghast they were. Finally, they had to organize a galactic hunt for Earth that took a century."

Lem Blake sweated as he forged on through the packed crowd. If only his bag didn't bump against shins producing two noises, one metallic, the other human and angry. But later, when they heard, they wouldn't mind. Blake grinned. Maybe they'd tell of it proudly.

"The ships searched everywhere for unmarked Earth, known only to be a frozen world of a dead sun. It was not even known how many planets had circled Earth's sun. Some thought three, others nine, again thirteen. Nobody could submit proof one way or another, so it became a blind search in a cosmic haystack. A star search.

"The only real clue was that it must be in the vicinity of Sirius, since it was known that such star systems as Centauri, Barnard and Epsilon Eridani held the earliest colonies of Starmen. Earth had to be somewhere among this general group, since the Starmen expanded outward slowly, jumping from near stars to far stars.

"All frozen worlds among that narrowed-down group were visited, for any tell-tale signs as to which would be Earth itself. They often had to burn down with atomic torches through glacial ice to examine ancient ruins."

Blake glared back at an indignant glare. He grew bolder as his goal neared. Not far now, another hundred feet.

"Ultimately, the most likely evidence pointed to one certain planet: the one we stand on today. Under the ice and hoar frost was found this ancient city whose ruins now surround you. A few scraps of chiseled wording on cornerstones matched the earliest writings of Earth we know of, at least prior to the 30th century. And so, we had

found the forgotten world, Mother Earth."

McKay remembered to make his voice ring just in time.

"The GHS then enthusiastically gave Earth its deserved and honored niche in galactic history. A dome, many times replaced and enlarged, was set up around the city ruins. Precious ruins, for they proved the only ones found on Earth. All else had vanished to dust. Visitors were welcomed. Earth became a shrine. In the past nine centuries, no less than twelve billions of our scattered people, from all corners of the galaxy, have made the pilgrimage here to home Earth."

Blake was close now, panting, not caring how he swung the bag. McKay was close now, too to the end of his lecture.

"Think once, my galactic fellowmen. This we believe was New York, main metropolis of ancient Earth. The then-existing oceans are gone, the continents utterly changed and jumbled, and the day is far longer than at that time. Everything of that long past era is obliterated in dusty time, except these few ruins.

"But this is Earth. Our home planet. Our Mother World. In reverent honor to our vanished ancestors of this alpha world, we ask that you bow your heads in silent tribute for a moment."

BLAKE had just reached the rostrum and was yelling, "Hey, Mr. Speaker, I'm Lem Blake and I got something to show you—"

Blake froze in horror even as his weak voice rang out like a gong in the pin-drop silence that had just fallen. But what did it matter now? He leaped on the rostrum before the startled lecturer.

"Listen," said Blake hurriedly. "Listen what I found—"

"Shut up," hissed McKay, snapping off the sound system. "Nothing like this happened in 900 years, a lecture interrupted. You fool. Don't ruin it all for them. See me later."

McKay tried to shove Blake bodily off the platform. But Blake twisted free. If he did not go through with it now, guards would come and hustle him out of the dome.

"Look, here in my bag," he begged. "An old-time relic, one I stumbled on looking for paydirt under deep ice. I knew it was a real old timer when I saw it. Maybe it's the biggest strike I ever made."

McKay took his hand away from Blake's collar. "Another relic of Earth, you mean? They're so scarce . . . let me see it. Hurry, man."

At last Blake fumbled it out of his bag and held it up.

Two cross-pieces of rusted metal, welded at right angles to a common bar, freakishly preserved by some oily patina, and with lettering still legible in white. From under glacial ice, it must be old as old.

FIFTH AVENUE read one cross-piece, to Professor McKay's trained eye. The other, 42nd STREET.

He stared.

Blake grinned suddenly. "And you know where I found it? Not here on Procyon V but over on Sol III. You know, about eleven light-years galactic east."

Blake grinned more, shrewdly measuring what he saw in McKay's face, and let go his bombshell, whose fuse had been burning uncertainly inside him all this time. "So this was the wrong Earth all the time, eh? Guess that really rocks you. It'll rock the galaxy too. I'll be famous—"

"Don't be a fool," hissed the professor, signalling guards. "You're mistaken . . . that is—but I'll explain later."

As the guards dragged Blake off, McKay said, "Take him to my office. See that he keeps his mouth shut till I get there."

In a moment, the reconnected sound system blared out to the puzzled audience—"Please pardon the rude interruption. And in conclusion, as we stand reverently on Mother Earth—"

My gaud! Did he think he was the first one? And did he think we'd change now after nine hundred years?

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

he didn't. Which is so involved that I must now silently fade away like an old soup-stain.

Yours sincerely,

NORMAN J. CLARKE

POTENT EXTRAPOLATION

38 Blendworth Crescent,
Leigh Park,
Havant,
Hants.
England

Dear Sir,

I have just received and perused your May issue, and am quite pleased with it; moreover, a letter in VIZIGRAPH intrigues me enough, to write a little on the same subject, (basically at least). Fellow fan Chas. R. Peterson is the culprit with his tirade on Absolute Zero, a subject which, to me, absolutely resonates with extrapolational potential for those who write Science-Fiction.

To take first things first, let's quote the definition of what is commonly known as Absolute Zero.

"The temperature at which gases, if they remained gases, would have no pressure."

This figure, as no doubt most of us know, is obtained by plotting a graph coordinating the temperatures and pressures of a fixed volume of gas, and extending it to the zero pressure line. A very convenient place to stop as we have, as yet, no conception of gases of negative pressure; but just surely the place for a Science-Fictionist to start.

Because a mathematical graph stops short at an axis is very insubstantial evidence, the quality recorded cannot extend past that limit, and if we look again at the definition it is plain to see that no such claim is made. By the time temperature has dropped to -269°C all the known gases have become liquids, so why trouble ourselves with negative pressures in gases?

Having given ourselves good reason, let's assume that there is no conceivable limit to the temperature range, in the same way as we assume the same thing for numbers, and see what a Science-Fictional mind can suggest. For a background to work on we'll utilize a couple of facts that have been known to physicists for some years.

First: As temperature nears "Absolute" metals lose more and more of their electrical resistance, or, conversely, electrical energy becomes more powerful.

Second: As temperature decreases within these regions most substances change their elastic properties, or in other words gradually become more and more brittle.

Now let's get the imagination to work.

Temperature forms the dimension which separates life systems otherwise occupying the same part of space. Judging from our own limited adaptability to temperature these life systems would necessarily be quite alien to each other; and with a dimension to separate them stretching from minus to plus infinity, what countless numbers there could be. To suggest an idea of such difference, in the next life system down the temperature dimension could we not expect to find that our known solids had disintegrated into energy, liquids solidified, gases liquified, with overlaps, and that such intangible quantities as electrical and radiation energy had taken on a more tenuous form?

We have already noted the implication with re-

gard to electricity. And what would become the intangible forces to replace those we now know as energy? Knowing as we do that heat and cold induce lethargy and activity respectively, might not the rate of living of whatever life forms there are be on a much higher tempo. Would the life forms be in any way imaginable?

Conversely we could imagine the next life system to use up the temperature dimension. All this material and I have never yet read a story on such a basis. You indirectly caused all this Mr. Bradbury, so how about leading the field with one of your first class stories?

And now a plea, addressed only to Fen, as I fear those unnatural people who keep away from imaginative fiction are incurable. Don't be such wet blanket pessimists. So many times have I seen letters criticising revolutionary ideas in Science-Fiction stories that I fear they will eventually become tied within boundaries of orthodoxy; and what a loss that would be, if only in ceasing to make people wonder about possibilities they would never have dreamed of. If an author makes the Earth and Sun change positions in the Solar System, don't look down your nose and doubt his sanity, rather, have a go at finding a plausible reason for such apparent illogic. It is entertaining, usually educating and above all keeps you from becoming stuffy and retrogressive.

I realize of course that there are a lot of progressive thinkers among us so don't shoot me down over that.

• A. KEITH KING

ABRUPT DEPARTURE

723 North Avenue 64

Los Angeles 42, California

Dear Ed:

After years of exhaustive research and comparative analysis, I have come to the conclusion that I am the sole possessor of the world's only legitimate gripe. What is this priceless gem of knowledge glittering among so much mundane muck? To avoid a long discourse, it is simply that I dislike (I could say hate but that's nasty) people who gripe. By now you must be clucking with joy and patting your fat paunch, thinking now I have you; you have uttered a self-contradictory statement. No jocko, I don't hate myself; in fact, I rather take a fancy to myself.

Now what has this to do with your mag? To put it bluntly, the May issue of PLANET Stories was chock-full of letters with aforesaid gripes. Don't know why but it seems that someone is always making a literary assault on something or somebody. The VIZIGRAPH is dominated by Carol McKinney and her crowd who are perpetually making derogatory remarks about something. It's about time someone else was given a chance to say something worthwhile—Eh?

Aside from these harmless lamentations, I really haven't too much to rant about. Everyone of the seven stories was a dan-dan-dandy, especially Phil Dick's JAMES P. CROW and Evelyn Goldstein's LAND BEYOND THE FLAME which was pretty good for a female-type-gal. Incidentally, I am looking forward to seeing more of Mr. Dick's superb stories in future PLANET issues.

It's about that time and my fingers are getting sore, so I'll have to say "at's all for now."

Yours defensively,

JOHN SCHIELDBERG

Ed's note: In the columns of VIZI, John, the
(Continued on page 92)

THE PLUTO LAMP

By CHAS. A. STEARNS

It was the most outrageous kind of irony that fate, and the Commission of Galactic Astrography, should select such a prime misfit as Knucklebone Smith to light the lamp of Pluto.

THIS is really two stories. The first is solar history; the second, the mostly true legend of a misfit called Knucklebone Smith.

Knucklebone, so far as anyone could ever determine, was his real name—the sin of prankish, or perhaps disillusioned parents. He was exactly six feet eight inches tall from the insulated soles of his engineering boots to the top of his planeteer's helmet. He never in his life weighed more than one hundred sixty-five pounds. His face was angular and horse-like, and it had never, within the memory of anyone who knew him, contained the slightest vestige of a smile.

He was not nature's first error, nor her last, but he differed from the unexceptional many in that he believed in Destiny . . . with a capital 'L.' Throughout a lifetime of unfortunate ventures he remained firm in the conviction that sooner or later he would find his own metier and become famous. At last he did, and that is the story of Knucklebone Smith.

The Pluto Lamp, a relic of the pioneering days of interstellar flight, is harder to explain, but easier to believe. It was once as well known to spacemen as Rafferty Shoals to the ancient China clippers.

The gulf between the stars was vast and uncharted in those days; still a thing of superstitious dread for the planet-bound. But it was no more unknown than the solitary planet which tails all the others in its dark, millennial path about our own sun. The planetary freighters went as far as Uranus and no farther. For the black little planet whose very namesake is Hell had nothing to attract them that could not be gotten at more conveniently.

The starships passed it by warily, giving it a wide berth, for it had an evil reputation. The old scanners were unreliable at best, what with the confusing debris that fills space, and more than one ship, through miscalculation, swerved from its course, brushing through the magnetic field of the unilluminated wasteland, and crashed on the hard frozen surface of Pluto.

It was inevitable that someone would give birth to the idea of the Lamp. It was to be a permanent, unmanned beacon, strategically placed on the Dead Planet to warn ships that should have passed in the night, but didn't always make it.

A magnificent idea, everyone thought. Everyone, that is, excepting Knucklebone Smith.

The very idea of Pluto made him ill. He had set his number twelve size feet on all the inner planets at one time or another in the disillusioning search for fortune. He had starved and thirsted, baked and bled for his dream. But he had always hated and avoided cold. He had, in fact, the look of a man born cold, and never entirely warmed.

It was the most outrageous kind of irony, therefore, that fate, and the Commission of Galactic Astrography, should select him to light the Lamp.

The latter, at least, was innocent of paradoxical motive. They needed a man like Smith. A man planet-wise enough to do the job, and not intelligent enough to decline it. There would be another man along, of course, to direct, but he presented no problem, for he was Professor Salvor-Jones, who had invented the Light, and insisted upon being along when it was installed. He was a dedicated man.

Knucklebone Smith, however, was dedi-



Illustration by Herman Vestal

cated to something else, and it was only his pressing need for money that prodded him into acceptance of the offer. He didn't care a fig for the safety of starships. This would be a dangerous job at best, decidedly unpleasant at worst. Smith didn't mind the danger; he had seen much of it in his wanderings; but of unpleasantness he had experienced even more, and being a sybarite by nature, in spite of his hard life, he preferred real (but painless) peril. He was sure that he would be cold on Pluto. He was right.

THE lamp was not really a light, of course, nor did it faintly resemble one. What it did, in fact, resemble, was a sleek space cruiser. This was wholly misleading, for though it was designed for interplanetary travel, it was to be a one-way voyage. Once in the orbit of Pluto it would nose down, smash a few feet into the crystalline surface of frozen ammonia, and remain there forever, standing on end like a lighthouse. It was at this point that it would cease to be a spaceship and become a beacon.

At least that was what Professor Salvor-Jones said.

The beacon was three hundred feet long, white in color, for some mysterious reason, and had cost the government of Earth something less than seventeen million dollars. It was packed with expensive robotic equipment, and was designed to be completely self-sustaining, once its controls were properly set. It did everything for passing starships that could possibly be expected of a well-reared beacon. It cheered them on the outward passage, making them feel less lonely. It greeted them, like a remote, cold Statue of Liberty upon their return, warned them of lurking meteorite storms within the vicinity of their course, and advised them of their position with relation to their destination when they contacted its sensitive radio. But most important, it warned them to steer clear of Pluto.

It very nearly failed before it had begun all this show of monkish wayside hospitality, however. It would have failed if it hadn't been for Knucklebone Smith.

They cut the beaconship loose from its convoy five hundred miles out, which was sufficient for it to spiral in on the minimum of power it carried and land safely.

Salvor-Jones and Smith had only to lie in their safety hammocks in the cramped temporary passenger cubicle. The ship would land by itself. Their duties began once it had established itself firmly on the bleak expanse of dark planet below them. They were to adjust the automatic controls, make tests, and generally see that the thing was as it should be for the lonely vigil that lay ahead.

Three weeks, Salvor-Jones indicated, should be plenty of time for all this. When it was finished, they could send a patrol cruiser from Ganymede to pick them up.

That was what he said but he was a very zealous man, and doted on thoroughness.

The fact was that they were finished with the tests in seven and a half hours, and there was nothing to do, unhappily, for the remaining twenty days except to entertain themselves as best they could, and wait. It might be said that things went too smoothly.

Professor Salvor-Jones was a smallish man with a square mustache of regulation black, and a lock of jet hair that hung at times over his left eye. He had a perpetual motion machine built into him, and a profound contempt for the normal pace of life.

But worst of all, in view of his predicament, he had Knucklebone Smith.

Salvor-Jones finished his checking at 1800 star time and came into the living compartment from the chill outer ship, or beacon, as it had now become. He blew on his hands, put away his check-sheet board, and stood uncertainly, gnawing his thumb and gazing at the spectacle of Smith hunkered silently in front of a portable radiant heater. Knucklebone was, as usual, the picture of contemplative suicide.

"Well, well," said Salvor-Jones briskly.

Smith made no answer. He swallowed thoughtfully, his Adam's apple convulsing, and continued to stare into the glowing sun of the heater.

"We've not much to do from now on, I'm afraid," Salvor-Jones said, "until a starship passes within range. Then we'll be able to see how well it works."

Smith nodded glumly. He was sulking. He had been assigned to assist, but this little man insisted on doing everything himself. Didn't trust a damn soul but himself. Pick up a tool and like as not he'd snatch

it from your hand and leave you standing there watching him, Smith hated people like that.

"Play chess?" Salvor-Jones asked.

"I never played chess," Knucklebone Smith said.

"Quite an assortment of games on board," Salvor-Jones said. "Checkers. Maybe you'd rather play checkers."

"Never tried it."

"Poker?"

"No."

Salvor-Jones sighed. He got out the animated slide pictures, set up the screen, and amused himself at length. The slides were mostly those of lightly clad females in warm climates, doing pleasantly idle things.

After the second slide, Knucklebone switched his chair around so that his back was to the screen. The girls made him feel too sentimental. The blue skies and golden beaches made him homesick.

ON THE fifth day Knucklebone Smith was fiddling with a power switch and blew out a safety fuse. It required some three hours for Professor Salvor-Jones to repair it, but he was glad for the diversion.

On the eighth day Smith was pottering in the pile room with an electric torch, making himself a wire bookrack. A lubrication reservoir caught on fire and a minor generator was ruined.

On the eleventh day he dropped a hammer from the fidley of the power room to the floor, a hundred feet below. A gas line was smashed. Salvor-Jones put on a gas mask and went down to fix it. It took quite a long while.

On the fourteenth day, without the slightest pretext, Salvor-Jones called Knucklebone Smith a meddling fool. Smith hit him once and that was that. They didn't speak to each other for four days.

The meteor storm came only three days before their exile was to end. On Pluto, where the frozen atmosphere lies inert on the surface, there was nothing to stop the rain of debris from space. It sounded like sporadic hail on the tough metal hull of the beacon, and their scopes showed the mass to be more than a million miles in width, streaming in from the direction of Orion.

Salvor-Jones was worried. There was a

tiny blip in the lower corner of the solar coordinate on the radar screen; a blip that occulted with alternating brightness and dimness, in a pattern of unnatural regularity. A ship!

Her radio came in an hour later. She announced her name, *Luna Star*, and destination, Alpha Centauri. The hail of stones from space was getting worse. The beacon was built to stand such stress, but a starship, meeting them head on—!

It was a dangerous situation.

Within the Pluto Lamp a hundred relays clicked and buzzed. Automatic switches closed. The power pack, deep in the body of the beacon hummed with sudden power. Even Knucklebone Smith seemed slightly interested. But nothing happened.

The ship's signal came in loud and clear once more. "This is *Luna Star*. Come in, robot station Pluto Lamp. Come in Pluto Lamp."

Salvor-Jones sprang for the manual switch and flicked it on. "*Luna Star*," he screamed, "Do you read me? This is Pluto Lamp. Do you read me?"

"This is *Luna Star*. We understand the robot station is now in operation, but manned. Come in if you are there."

"*Luna Star*, do you read me?" They waited a long, tense minute. There was no answer. "We're not getting through," Salvor-Jones said.

Knucklebone cleared his throat. "There's a red light on over at the emergency panel. Would that have anything to do with it?"

"You imbecile!" Salvor-Jones said, "Why didn't you say so. It's the antenna. I knew it. I knew there'd be trouble with the antenna! A meteorite must have damaged it."

"I guess this thing ain't going to work," Knucklebone said. "We've been here only a couple of weeks, and look what happens. I never thought it would be any good anyway."

Salvor-Jones bared his teeth. "There isn't a storm like this one every twenty-five years," he growled. "Don't sit there; we've got to go up on the dome. No! Stay where you are. I don't want this job botched." He began to struggle into his exposure suit.

"If the *Star* hits it head-on there'll be hell to pay," Knucklebone said diffidently. "I was in one of these storms once before

on an old crate out in the Belt." He got up and stretched his spidery frame languidly. Then he went over and took down his impossibly long exposure suit from its hook.

"What are you doing?" Salvor-Jones said.

"Guess I'll go with you."

"You're going to play hell," Professor Salvor-Jones said in an unscholarly manner. "What good could you possibly be?"

There was a steely glint in Knucklebone Smith's eyes. Later on, at the inquiry, Salvor-Jones testified concerning that glint. "Listen," Smith said, "I guess I'm sick and tired of you trying to play the big hero all alone on this here tub. A body would think I was a moron. They picked me out of millions, didn't they? That's Destiny. I guess you haven't thought about it, but everybody's got a Destiny—something they can do better than anybody else. Everybody's good at something." It was a long speech for Knucklebone Smith. There were two red spots of anger on his sallow cheeks.

"So I've heard," Salvor-Jones said wryly. "Well, come along, but don't say I didn't warn you. It may be the end of us, you know."

Knucklebone snorted. He had walked in the shadow of death before. A man had his destiny. Something worthwhile to perform before he kicked off. And if he had ever done anything worthwhile he couldn't remember it. He zipped up his suit and reached for his helmet.

The roof hatch, massively armored, opened noiselessly on its hydraulic supports. The coldness rushed at them, and could not be entirely shut out by the suits. Smith shivered throughout his long, skinny body.

Clambering out on the roof of the beacon they became aware of what seemed like a strong wind, but what was, in reality, microscopic interstellar dust from the storm, traveling at supersonic speed, flattening their suits against them.

Here and there a pea-sized pebble clanged against the metal hull like a bullet. Crouching in the shelter of the antenna tower, they scanned its naked ribs of steel alloy for a break.

At last Salvor-Jones, who knew what he was looking for, found it, six feet up, where a meteorite had smashed into the coaxial and shorted it against the frame. He

climbed up and went to work, cursing to himself in his helmet as the death missiles hurtled about him.

It seemed to Salvor-Jones that he had been up there forever, with one leg draped over a brace, clumsily working with his heavy gloves. The cold was seeping in more and more in spite of the fact that it could not have been more than half an hour from the time of his ascent.

He clambered down at last, beating his hands together to restore circulation.

Knucklebone Smith, who had done nothing, leaned against the tower on the storm side. He was staring fixedly at something out in that perpetual night. But there was nothing to see. Only the faint glow of the bluish-white methane crystals, swirling through the frozen gullies of the rugged terrain; sweeping around the dark ridges as they were agitated by the driving stellar dust.

"You'll be killed out there," Salvor-Jones said into his mike. "Get behind something, quick!"

Smith said nothing. He just stood there, with his back to Salvor-Jones, contemplating the horizon as the storm rippled his uniform. His position had not shifted a fraction of an inch. It was this fact that frightened Salvor-Jones suddenly. He caught his breath, and crept around the edge of the shelter. He reached out and shook his assistant's arm.

Knucklebone Smith did not move. There was a gaping hole in the side of his helmet where a rock had struck. He had frozen to death, standing up.

A SUDDEN flurry of unseen particles buffeted Salvor-Jones and bowled him over. Something big smashed against the roof hatch with such force that the entire beacon shuddered. The lid of the hatch, its braces torn from under it, clanged shut. Then the sudden gust abated.

Salvor-Jones crawled over to the escape hatch and looked at it. It was slightly askew; there was plenty of room to get his hands under the edge of it. He tugged manfully in an effort to slide it aside enough to admit him, but in vain. It weighed more than half a ton.

He pried at it with his adjustable wrench

but it wouldn't budge. He looked around for something longer. There was nothing.

Professor Salvor-Jones realized that he was going to die on Pluto. He wished that he believed in prayer.

He read the gage of his heating unit. Not much longer.

He sat down on the hatch, heedless of the silent flak about him. He envied Knucklebone Smith over there; the man had never known what hit him.

Knucklebone was still standing there, tall against the night, rigidly leaning against the superstructure, an impossible caricature of death.

Something clicked in Salvor-Jones's brain. One faint, mad hope. He crawled over and tugged at Smith's legs. The tall corpse came crashing down on top of him.

He seized one unyielding foot, a big, all-important, boot-clad foot that stuck out at just the right angle, and began to drag Knucklebone across the width of the dome.

The *Lunar Star* got through safely. It was turned aside by a last minute warning from the Pluto Lamp beacon. This impressed the importance of the Lamp in the minds of the authorities, as is attested to by history, for it was in service well over one hundred years after Salvor-Jones's ordeal.

In Selena City there is a small monument, equally dedicated to the two heroes, Salvor-Jones and Smith. For the professor declared that Smith had been as much responsible for the success of the Lamp as he, himself. Hadn't he saved the day, there at the very last?

As for Knucklebone Smith, his frozen body still lies in simple state on Pluto. There is a faint, fixed smile on his face; or presumably there is, for Salvor-Jones attests that it was there that night. And it can hardly have escaped him now.

For it was just as Knucklebone had always said. Every man is good for something.

Even if it is only to be used for a lever.



THE TIME-TECHS OF KRA

By MAX SHERIDAN

The elusive technical knowledge of eons, past and future, was held captive by the mighty Kralons—learned giant insects that seined the stream of Time for the great Truth that would mold them into unrivalled masters of the universe.

THE little gray man peered timidly over gold-rimmed spectacles at the great black hole which yawned hungrily almost at his feet. He edged back cautiously from the massive steel lattice which guarded its circumference, then plucked timidly at the sleeve of the blue-

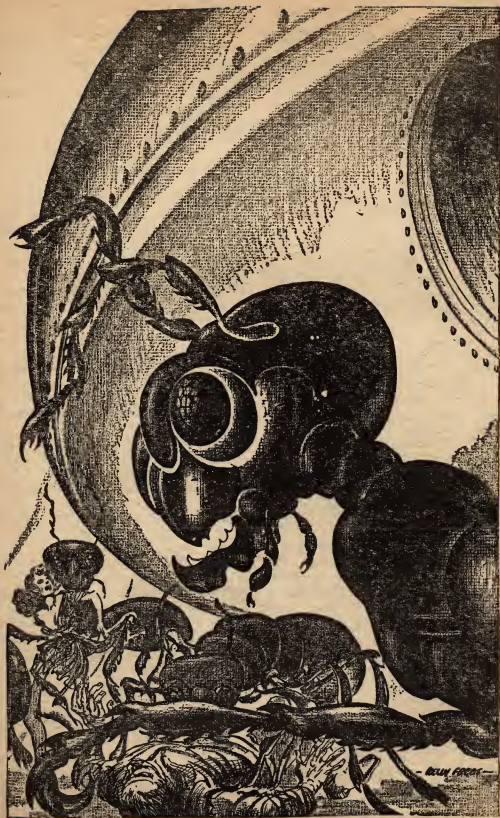
uniformed guard who stood impressively erect before the barrier's huge gate.

"I—I beg your pardon. Could you tell me when the next one leaves?" he asked in a voice as colorless as his thin, nondescript features.

The guard catalogued the speaker with a

Illustration by Kelly Freas





glance, and a superior smile lifted the corners of his lips.

"Not figuring on making the Big Drop, are you, Uncle?" he asked in obvious amusement.

"Well, I—"

Then the gilt epaulets on the guard's padded shoulders jerked as he came suddenly to a respectful attention.

"Next Diamvator leaves promptly at 2:30 P.M., sir. Arrives at the Antipodes at 6:30 P.M. Central Standard Time, sir."

The obsequious reply brought a veil of mild surprise to the little man's pale gray eyes.

Then it was replaced with a twinkle of understanding as he saw the Terminal Agent approaching.

J. B. Andrew, the big bluff Supervisory Agent of Earth-Tube, Incorporated, cast a cursory glance at the little gray man, then turned to the guard.

"The 'Vator will leave at 2:35 P.M. today, Jamieson. Five minutes later than schedule. You will act accordingly."

As the Agent turned to leave, the little gray man cleared his throat and said timidly, "I—I'd like to ask about your round trip rate to—to the other side."

The Terminal Agent looked appraisingly at the little man for a moment, then said courteously, "Glad to answer any questions. If you will step over to my office I'll give you one of our brochures which describes in detail the advantages of the Diamvator over surface travel."

When the door had closed behind them in the Agent's office, the little man's appearance changed subtly. His drooping shoulders were suddenly squarer, and his pale eyes seemed to darken to the color of the granite blocks of the floor.

"Randall is my name, Mr. Andrews. Willard Randall," he said, and his thin, colorless voice seemed to have gained the depth and assurance of a man who is confident of his ability to meet any situation.

Andrew's jaw sagged, and a startled ejaculation burst from his lips.

"You—Randall? I—" The Agent paused, then recovered his usual composure and apologized. "I'm sorry, Mr. Randall. I guess I had expected a—well, a larger man," he completed lamely.

"I understand," Randall said, smiling at Andrew's evident embarrassment. "I don't look exactly like the popular conception of an International Investigation Agent, you mean. But, you see, the less we look like IIA's, the more likely we are to catch some-one off-guard."

"That's probably true," Andrews agreed doubtfully, "but—"

"But can I deliver the goods?" Randall completed with a smile. "That's what's worrying you, isn't it?"

Without waiting for an answer from the embarrassed Andrews, Randall continued, "Now, about your trouble. If you'll please outline the whole affair. Absolutely everything you know about it, whether it seems relevant or not."

The Agent for Earth-Tube, Inc. hesitated a moment, then began.

AS YOU probably know, it was in 1996 that the International Federation of Nations was formed, supplanting the United Nations. At that time all countries were consolidated under a single unified government.

"Because the consolidation definitely obviated the possibility of war, and because the economic situation necessitated a governmental boost, the leaders conceived the idea of utilizing the excess man-power in sinking a huge shaft to investigate the hypothesis that the Earth's core is a vast treasure house of metal.

"The results of the gargantuan undertaking were, from one standpoint, considerably less than miraculous. After penetrating almost four thousand miles to the very center of the Earth, it was found that the major part of the core was metal, alright, but only nickel-iron, which could be mined much more cheaply nearer the Earth's surface.

"There seemed to be no higher a proportion of the rarer metals in the core than on the surface.

"Although somewhat disgruntled at the results of their investigation, the governmental heads knew that they must keep busy the thousands of men thrown out of employment by the dissolution of armies and navies. So, having nothing better in mind, this fantastic WPA was commis-

sioned to put the shaft on through to the other side of the Earth."

Randall nodded impatiently. "I am familiar with the historical data," he said. "Now if you will give me a resumé of the circumstances which have an immediate bearing on the trouble—"

Andrews colored at the little man's tone, and said gruffly, "I was only reviewing the data from the beginning, because there have been several developments in the past which may well have a bearing on our present difficulty."

The Investigation Agent nodded. "Make the historical review as brief as possible, then."

"After the shaft was completed," Andrews continued, more than a little piqued, "the question arose as to what should be done with the hundred billion dollar hole in the ground, now that it was finally completed."

"Some engineers advised salvaging the incredibly heat-resistant fifty-foot thick cellular caisson of Tungalloy, which alone had made possible the penetration through thousands of miles of molten material under tremendous pressure."

"Others maintained that the cost of removing it would be far in excess of the caisson's value."

"While the battle was raging, J. T. Welles, president of Metals, Inc. came to the fore with an offer for a concession on the Earth-Tube."

"He proposed to construct a tubular car or cage which would traverse the almost eight thousand miles in only four hours—more than twenty four hours less than the time required for a trip to the Antipodes by stratosphere plane."

"His argument for the success of the undertaking lay, not so much in the time saved on the trip, but in the novelty of the method of travel, and its value for giving people a taste of what weightless travel in space ships would be like. His imagination capitalized on the fact that Man is always on the alert for some new and strange way of cheating his perambulatory equipment of its needed exercise."

"Before advancing his proposition, he'd had his engineers draw up complete plans

and specifications of the proposed cage and the necessary auxiliary equipment."

"The cage itself was to be a zeppelin-shaped projectile— But come, the Diamvator itself is due in five minutes."

Andrews arose and led the way to the terminal gate, and for the next few minutes Randall unobtrusively strolled around the circumference of the Earth-Tube, examining its massive steel barrier. He completed his circuit and was peering timidly through the steel lattice, when a long-drawn "whoooooosh" and a metallic click sounded from the black depths.

He turned inquiringly to Andrews, who hastened to explain. "Closing of the air-locks," he said. "You see, the air is only partially exhausted from the Earth-Tube, so that the Diamvator will be held from the Tube sidewall during its free fall. Thus it does not attain the full acceleration of a freely falling body in a vacuum by a great deal. Consequently it does not approach its full pendular ascent from the Earth's center against gravitation."

"It lacks 'falling' to the surface of the Earth by over ten thousand feet, so some means had to be provided for propelling the Vator on up to the surface. To accomplish this, automatic air locks were installed in the tube almost three hundred miles from either end, with other locks every few miles from there to the surface."

"When the Vator has passed a lower lock, both that one and the lock above it close, and air is admitted under high pressure below the Vator and exhausted above it, thus pushing the car up to the surface, where it is grasped and held by interlocking steel arms—"

Andrews was interrupted by a second "whoooooosh" as the upper lock opened, followed immediately by the appearance of the bullet-shaped nose of the Diamvator.

SLOWLY the tube car ascended until its nose towered far above the heads of the milling crowd which by this time surrounded the terminal. Suddenly a harsh click told that the steel arms had gripped the Vator. Friction rollers whined as they rotated the car until its massive door coincided with the barrier gate.

As Andrews and Randall watched, the

guard unlocked the gate and slid it into its slot, then unbarred the Vator door and pushed it open.

"All out for American Terminus, Lad-rigo, Brazil," he called in a routine monotone.

Not a sound came from the interior of the Diamvator. The guard hesitated a moment, then stepped through the door into the tube car.

Within ten seconds he reappeared, fright etched on drawn features.

"Mr. Andrews!" he rasped from stiff lips. "It—it's happened again!"

Andrew's heavy features sagged. "No!" he said huskily. No, it couldn't!"

Then with a bound he was through the Vator door with Randall at his heels. Inside, it took a moment for Randall's eyes to accommodate to the dimmer light. Then he saw that the interior of the Diamvator was remarkably like a comfortable drawing room in a luxurious home.

Several beautifully inlaid walnut tables occupied the central portion of a mirror-like floor. Gleaming chrome and leather chairs were spaced around them. Luxurious davenports and huge easy chairs ringed the circumference of the room, and the whole inviting scene was softly but pleasantly illuminated by high-frequency tubes set flush in the domed ceiling.

Randall's glance made the complete circuit of the room before the astounding fact crashed through to his mind that there was not a single person in the room!

Randall stood stock still for a moment, cataloguing the details of the room, and trying to assimilate the facts of this strange enigma.

Then he turned to Andrews and asked, "How many passengers left the Antipodes in the Vator?"

"Ten," Andrews said huskily. "That's three times in the last month this has happened. I—I don't know what—"

"How about cargo?" Randall interrupted, his pale eyes glowing with a newly awakened fire. "Any valuable shipment?"

Andrews shook his head vehemently. "That's what makes it even more inexplicable! Each time this thing has happened there has been nothing but baggage scheduled. The mail and most of our insured ex-

pressage goes out on the 6:30 A.M. trip. I—"

"Any idea how anything could possibly disappear from the Diamvator during its trip? Don't you have radio contact with the car?"

Again the Earth-Tube supervisor shook his head. "How anything or anyone could leave the Vator during the trip, even with the aid of its passengers, is more than a mystery. It's impossible! As for contact, we have no communication with the Vator from the time it leaves one side until it reaches the other. You see, the Earth's metal core entirely absorbs and blankets Hertzian waves, making radio communication impossible from car to surface."

Randall nodded. "Do you have a steward on the Tube Car during the trip?"

"Yes," Andrews said wearily. "This is the third we've lost. I don't—"

"That's queer," said Randall suddenly. He pointed to the clock on the mantel above the imitation fireplace. "Over two hours slow," he mused, glancing at his wrist watch. "It's a wonder you fellows wouldn't supply the Vator with a good timepiece."

Andrews' jaw sagged. "Why, that's the same thing that happened the other two times!" he said in amazement. "The first time it was almost six hours fast. The second time, over eight hours slow. And now, two hours slow!"

"Well?" prompted Randall.

"There's something queer about that. The last time I radioed the Antipodes and made sure the clock was correct just before the Vator left!"

Randall was silent for a moment. "Well," he said at last. "There's only one way to track this thing down. And that's to get the information first hand. Andrews, you can book my passage on your next trip."

The Earth-Tube supervisor gasped. "You aren't going in the face of what's happened!"

"Someone has to," Randall returned. "I'll go as your steward."

II

TWO hours later Randall stood stiffly at attention in his somewhat oversized steward's uniform while eleven passengers

filed into the Diamvator, chattering in excitement over their coming adventure.

Randall wondered with a wry smile what their reactions would be if they knew what had happened to the Diamvator's passengers on three preceding trips. The secret agent had not been entirely in agreement with his Chief's orders that the mysteries be suppressed and that passengers still be accepted. But he saw the logic of keeping the trap baited. And Randall realized, with a warm feeling inside, that his Chief depended upon him to protect the eleven lives which were the bait in a trap which he hoped fervently would not close upon those who set it!

Slowly the chattering passengers took their places in the comfortable chairs. After the yard-thick door had swung ponderously shut, and the outside bar had been thrust home, Randall cautioned the passengers to keep their seats, then found his own place.

There came a sudden breathless drop as the upper lock opened, and the steel arms released the Vator upon the cushioning column of air above the next lower lock. A sibilant hiss sounded through the room as twelve people fought for breath when the Vator floor tried to drop from beneath them.

Two women screamed in high thin voices that tore at the agent's ears. The fat traveling salesman from New Orleans clapped his plump hands to his throat, and his eyes looked like pale blue marbles. The bronzed big game hunter looked as if he were face to face with a lion crouched for attack. The white-haired professional gentleman colored as if he had swallowed a chameleon.

Slowly the falling sensation faded, and a vast sigh of relief sounded through the room. Then a second chorus of gasps arose from eleven throats. The young engineer on his way to the uranium mines in Borneo rasped out in a choked voice: "Just—passing through the lower lock—into—near vacuum!"

Randall nodded with effort and waited breathlessly until finally the Vator had attained an almost constant acceleration.

When the eleven passengers had lost a little of their pallor, and a few had even begun to laugh and talk among themselves, Randall arose and strolled around the room.

He quietly examined the massive door which could be opened only from the outside. Then he turned and strolled about the room, carefully but covertly scrutinizing every person aboard.

There were four middle-aged school teachers who were trying to recover the vicarious thrills of vanished youth.

A young couple with the obvious devotion of honeymooners occupied the lounge across the room.

A reserved old gentleman with a mane of white hair and a professional mien sat in the big Morris chair to the right of the newlyweds. Randall immediately catalogued him as a doctor, or perhaps a scientist of some sort.

On the other side of the four school ma'ams was a chap Randall couldn't quite analyze. He was tall and spare and lithe, with the bronze of the sun in his cheeks, and a thousand tiny wrinkles like ripples surrounded the deep blue of his eyes.

Randall instinctively liked the chap. He looked wholesome and true-blue. He looked like a man who'd seen a lot of the world and liked most of it.

The young engineer, the lion hunter, and the fat traveling salesman completed the list of passengers.

The trouble was, Randall concluded, there wasn't a person in the Vator who looked as if he could be guilty of any real crime, much less the wholesale kidnappings, which had evidently taken place.

But if the enigma of the Earth Tube were not instigated by some one in the Vator, how in the name of a thousand mysteries could it happen at all?

Randall shrugged. It looked as if a philosophical approach was worse than hopeless.

He'd have to map out a plan of direct action. A plan that would tell him more of the true characters of his eleven companions.

He looked at the clock on the mantel. It's dial showed a little after 4:00 P.M., so according to the schedule, the Vator should be rapidly nearing the center of the Earth.

Randall started toward the professional gentleman in the big chair. He had completed four steps when sudden catastrophe blasted all plans from his mind.

THE women didn't scream this time. It all happened too quickly. There wasn't even time for Randall to complete the step he had started.

Thunder with a thousand toneless voices echoed through his mind. Lightning with the hues of alien spectra shot blindingly into his eyes. He felt as though he had suddenly grasped the two poles of an electric circuit. His muscles contracted spasmodically and numbness clutched with deadly anesthesia at his groping mind.

When the stupor finally began to retreat from Randall's bewildered consciousness, the first sounds he identified were the delayed screams of the four school ma'ms and the bride.

He cautiously opened his smarting eyes and looked around. What he saw was far from reassuring, for it was vividly apparent that they were no longer in the Diamvator. In fact, there was no sign whatever to be seen of the Tube Car!

Randall blinked, looked again. He and his eleven companions were suspended like fallen acrobats in a huge net constructed of closely-woven metallic strands.

A dozen feet above his head was a coruscating sheet of stratified radiance that arched across like a miniature sky, forming a hemispherical dome of light over the great net.

Randall cleared his throat noisily. He had stalked desperate criminals into their hiding places.

He had daringly matched cunning with determined dope rings. He had stood face-to-face with armed murderers, but never as now had he felt so completely at a loss. Never had he been so neatly and easily trapped.

But what was behind it all? And how had it been done? What earthly—or other—agency could contrive to tear twelve people from the interior of a locked metal car traveling in excess of two thousand miles an hour?

Randall shrugged and turned to examine his eleven charges.

The newlyweds, Charles and Evelyn McMahon, were clutching each other frantically as if their very salvation lay in their proximity.

Blake Garnet, the lion hunter, had cau-

tiously gained his feet and was edging gingerly across the net toward Randall.

The four school ma'ms were trying frantically to sit up, clutching each other as if separation spelled death.

Randall remembered their names because they were so thoroughly, almost ludicrously American. Retta Shields, Laura Hanks and Sarah Nelson were the three thin ones, and Mamie Wilson was the plump, good-natured one.

Paul Gerard, the white-haired professional gentleman, was interestedly gazing up at the coruscating hemisphere of radiance.

Angus McClellan, the lean whimsical chap whom Randall hadn't been able to catalogue, was talking in low tones with Gordon Malherne, the young engineer.

Randall started forward to meet Blake Garnet, when suddenly the net began to sink beneath his feet.

Down and down it sank, until Randall felt a firm foundation under his feet. Then the edges of the net were pulled up and over until the twelve humans were rolled pell-mell together in the bottom of a huge woven bag. A huge eye peered in at the twelve startled humans. An eye that glinted light from a thousand separate facets.

Randall heard his own gasp amid the bedlam of mingled screams and shouts from the passengers. Then a huge clawed arm reached down through the opening at the top of the net bag. Reached straight for the huddled humans.

Randall felt the chitinous limb slide past his body, then a frenzied scream dinned in his ears.

The kicking thrashing body of Evelyn McMahon was lifted high in the air to disappear through the opening above.

Her husband had clutched her until she was torn from his grasp, and now, with a low cry of anguish he started climbing frantically up the strands of the net.

He had clambered half the distance when the chitin-covered limb appeared again, and Charles McMahon went to join his bride.

Randall was heartsick. He could do nothing, absolutely nothing, and he knew it was only a matter of seconds until that huge claw would return for another struggling, screaming human.

He hoped frantically that he would escape the horrible suspense; that he himself would be the next victim. However, he wasn't. He had to wait until two of the school teachers and the young engineer were gone before the opposing claws closed around him.

He waited for the crushing violence of those great talons, but instead, there was only a gentle pressure as he felt himself lifted smoothly and easily from the net.

In another moment he was set free in a small open field covered with a thick carpet of grass. A tall stockade constructed of foot-thick wooden piling, sharpened at the upper ends, enclosed fifteen or twenty acres of field.

HE LOOKED around and saw Charles McMahon trying to calm his sobbing bride, and Gordon Malherne, the engineer, chafing the hands of the two school teachers who had preceded him.

Randall started toward the group, when a shadow passed over him, and Doctor Gerard was released from the great claw almost beside him. The white-haired scientist scrambled to his feet and turned toward Randall with a grimace.

"Nice business," he said. "I used to consider Entomology a respectable profession, and I fancied myself quite capable in my line. But from the looks of our captor, I guess my job has grown too big for me!"

Randall tried to smile at the other's joke, but his grin wasn't very successful. "Let's see what we can do for the women folk," he suggested.

Their work was immediately complicated by the arrival of the other two teachers in quick succession. They were finally beginning to have a little success in quieting the trembling women, when the claw again appeared, depositing Jerome Jackson beside them.

The fat little salesman scrambled to his feet with a squall of fear. His cheeks quivered like twin puddings, and his eyes seemed almost to be growing on stalks.

"Wha—what was it?" he quavered.

Randall almost smiled. "Doctor Gerard seems to think it's somewhat buggy," he replied. "You can draw your own conclusions."

Jackson was about to reply when the

claw again descended, and Blake Garnet was released.

His black eyes were inky pools of consternation, and his healthy bronze had faded a dozen shades. He recovered his composure quickly when he saw his companions, and a thin smile fought through.

"Looks like a one-bug plague to me," he remarked. "—Whoops, here comes our cow-puncher!"

Angus McClellan still had his one-sided grin as he shook his long lanky body and looked quizzically at the disheveled group of humans.

"Never had anything like that around Sidney," he said. "Chamber of Commerce wouldn't allow it. What's the next installment anyway of the 'Clue of the Chitin Claw'?"

Randall shook his head. "That's all of us, I guess. Anybody hurt?"

Everyone looked around, and finally all shook their heads.

"That is, if you don't count a damaged ego and a completely wrecked peace of mind," added Blake Garnet. "Now what, for heaven's sake?"

"May as well look around," suggested Randall. "I see some kind of buildings across the field."

The others followed the Agent's gesture; saw several dozen low, domed structures squatting in even rows a few hundred yards away.

Randall started toward them, the others following cautiously. When they were within a dozen yards of the structures, a door in the first one opened and a man stepped out.

He was a magnificent figure of a man. And his splendid body was a fitting support for the god-like head, broad of brow, features finely chiseled.

"Wel-come," he said in queer blurred accents. "Wel-come to the Time Tribe."

He advanced toward them, extending his hand. "I am Zor Ala, a 40B-7 type from the 43rd Century, according to the ancient reckoning of Anno Domini. And you—?"

Randall spoke for the group, his mind fumbling for the meaning of the man's words. "We're a group of passengers who were somehow snatched from our passage through the Earth-Tube. But what—"

"Oh, yes," interrupted Zor Ala reminiscently. "That strange and useless hole through the Earth that finally collapsed around 3000 A.D. We have a number of other Earth-Tube passengers here with us. But from what period did you come?"

Randall replied wonderingly, "Why from this, —2062 A.D. of course!"

Zor Ala shook his head slowly, a strange smile on his lips. "But this is far from being 2062, my friend," he said softly. "As closely as we have been able to reckon it, we are now living in what you would call the Carboniferous Period, probably in the latter part."

He waited a moment for his words to take effect, then continued: "And that would place our present era—" He nodded at Doctor Gerard. "Yes, my friend, I see that you understand we are now, amazingly enough, living in a time which preceded our births by approximately two hundred million years!"

Doctor Gerard turned to face his companions. "Yes," he said slowly. "I had guessed at something like this. The color and brilliance of the sun, the type of grasses, and the size and shape of the flora visible over the stockade. Yes, I'd thought of this possibility, but couldn't bring myself to really believe it!"

"But our captors," interjected Randall. "What are they? How did they trap us? And what do they intend to do with us?"

"They're just what they appear to be," said Zor Ala solemnly. He looked at Randall, and his fine eyes were bleak. "They are a species of insect which has apparently progressed both in size and in intellect far beyond any other life form of this period. And unlike the insects of my time, and undoubtedly of yours, these things act through intelligent reasoning rather than through a set pattern of instincts."

"But," interrupted Doctor Gerard, "according to the theory of most Entomologists of my time, it would be impossible for an insect to attain the size of these creatures! Their bodily structure is wrong. They couldn't support their own weight. And if they could, their inefficient breathing tubes and trachea couldn't furnish their bodies with sufficient oxygen, nor remove the waste products!"

Zor Ala smiled tolerantly. "The proof of possibility is their existence," he said. "Your contemporaries' theory is obviously incorrect."

"How can one deny the possibility of huge insects without knowing the strength of materials in their supporting structure? Do the gigantic Sequoias in North America collapse because of their almost four hundred foot height, as a Balsa undoubtedly would if it attained the same size?"

"Is it philosophically logical that, because insects of your day possessed an exoskeleton incapable of supporting larger creatures, that these creatures must also possess those exact characteristics? Such an argument is absurd. Evolution fits the strength of the supporting structure to the weight it must support. And naturally the means for oxygenation and elimination are likewise accommodated."

Doctor Gerard was still unconvinced, but Randall got in the next word.

"How many more of you are there?" he asked.

"Have you any more companions from your own Age?"

Zor Ala shook his head. "No more from my own time, but there are more than a hundred humans from other ages," he said. "Come, they are anxious to meet the new arrivals."

He led them to a large structure which bulked in a central position, surrounded by the smaller buildings.

An oddly-assorted but unquestionably colorful group of humans greeted their entrance in a dozen different tongues. They gathered around the new arrivals with a hundred excited queries.

"A minute, my friends," Zor Ala cautioned in his queer, blurred English. "These people are come from the year 2062. They were captured during a passage through the ancient Earth-Tube by the Kralons' Time Net, just as you were dragged from your own various Ages for the Kralons' selfish plans."

In the bewildering hours that followed, the Vator companions learned the answers to some of their enigmatic experiences. But they learned also of strange and horrible things which even the more advanced of the queer colony did not understand.

III

AMONG their new acquaintances was a stocky, pop-eyed physicist with a fringe of hair like stiff iron wire, who introduced himself as Gordo Lanson. In the year 2076 he had been experimenting with a new super-cyclotron and inadvertently had been caught in the almost inconceivably strong magnetic field used for the acceleration of electrons in the vast atom smasher.

He had felt a moment of intense vertigo, a wrenching, dimensional sort of straining of every cell, then he, like the Vator passengers, had found himself suspended in the huge net.

There were also a dozen orientals, some from Hiroshima and some from Nagasaki. They had been here since the days of the atomic blasts.

Then there was a thin, dark-skinned chap with strange eyes. He had been flashing through space on an exploratory trip to Jupiter, when suddenly his ship had spun into an etheric vortex, one of those enigmatic whirlpools of magnetic flux which were so deadly to space travel. He, Dar Mikol, had been torn from 3122, the year of the great space war between Earth-colonized Mars and its parent planet.

There was a Russian peasant who had been plowing his field in 1688 when a lightning bolt split the lowering skies and threw him through time and space to land in the Kralons' net.

There were also fifteen other people from Randall's own time; the missing Vator passengers of prior trips.

There were a hundred or so more humans in the strange colony, and all had been drawn to this strange primeval world through some esoteric passage induced by the Kralons' Time Trap.

"But what is the reason behind it?" Randall asked Zor Ala in bafflement. "Why do they want us? What do they do with us?"

Before Zor Ala had a chance to reply, a loud click sounded from a small diaphragm on the wall, then a harsh voice rasped out a dozen words in crudely accented English.

Randall didn't catch the meaning. He turned questioning to Zor Ala.

The future man sighed. "The Kralons want to interview the new arrivals," he said.

"You are to wait at the West gate in the stockade."

"And if we don't?" Randall asked.

"I would," Zor Ala said soberly.

Randall shrugged and led his companions across the field.

Jerome Jackson was shaking even more violently than the four school ma'ams. The fat little salesman's plump cheeks quivered, and his pale eyes rolled in their sockets.

"Wha—what are they going to do with us now?" he quavered.

Randall examined the man pityingly. "Apparently nothing very serious," he said. "Because our new companions over there are still very much alive."

However, Randall didn't know the full extent of the Kralons' inhumanity. Zor Ala hadn't had time to tell him that not all the human arrivals in the world of the Kralons were still in the stockade. There hadn't been time to discuss the fate of sixteen humans who had never come back from their appointments with their strange captors!

Just then the stockade door opened and a harsh voice rasped: "First human will come now."

The companions looked at each other, then Randall started to step forward, but Blake Garnet was ahead of him. The hunter stepped through the door, head held high, a saturnine grin on his rugged features.

"Just my meat," he called back. "An ant with Elephantiasis should be fair prey for a big game hunter."

When the door had closed behind Garnet, Angus McClellan grinned a little wryly at Randall.

"A great a'nt is sometimes okay," he drawled, "if her name is Sarah, and she leaves you a pile of jack."

Randall grinned back at him. He recognized the other's wisecracking as an attempt to keep up the morale of the party.

"Which species do you prefer?" he asked.

The lanky Australian squinted. "Wa—al," he said. "Don't know but what I'd prefer the Kralons to Aunt Sarah, when she had her dander up."

The companions grinned feebly. It was hard to even attempt cheerfulness, when God alone knew what might lie on the other side of that bare metal door.

It seemed hours that they waited for

Blake Garnet to come back. But he never came. Instead, again the door opened, and a harsh voice rasped: "One more now."

Randall was first this time, with McClellan close at his heels. The voice rasped sharply: "Only one at a time." And McClellan turned back slowly.

Randall found himself on a hard smooth path outside the stockade, and waiting for him was a smaller edition of the gigantic creature he had glimpsed while he and his companions were in the net.

This Kralon was not much larger than Randall, but the agent shuddered instinctively at its repulsive appearance, and at the strange, nauseating odor it exuded.

The creature turned and led the way down the path. Randall followed.

The weird creature led the way into a great high-domed structure of gray stone. It led Randall down a huge hallway from which hundreds of openings diverged to lesser corridors leading to other parts of the massive building. Then the hall they were following evolved into a great central chamber, lighted with a weird blue glow which emanated from the walls and ceiling of the huge room.

IN A semicircle, facing Randall, sprawled ten enormous Kralons, their huge mandibles clacking like monstrous telegraph keys. But it was the central figure which held Randall's attention.

In the center of the semicircle, the eleventh Kralon crouched before a massive instrument of wood and metal. And as Randall and his guide entered the room, the monster started to finger a yard-long keyboard surprisingly similar to that of a huge pipe-organ.

A crudely-accented voice asked in uneven tempo: "What is your name, and what is your Time Era?"

Randall didn't answer. He hadn't even heard. He was staring with horrified fascination at the hands of the monster at the keyboard. Hands which each had four tapering fingers and a thumb, instead of two opposing claws; hands the delicate hue of old ivory, instead of the brownish black of the other Kralons' chitinous limbs!

"What is your name, and your Time Era?"

"Randall," he answered, his voice thin and colorless in the huge room. "Willard Randall. And I'm from the twenty-first Century, A.D."

The mandibles of the huge creatures clacked spasmodically for a moment, then the Kralon at the instrument, which Randall had recognized as a sort of Voder, ran those weird, incongruous fingers over the keyboard, and the instrument spoke again.

"We're sorry," it said. "We had hoped to draw from the more distant future, when more intelligence could be expected."

"Sorry," said Randall in his flat voice. "Awfully sorry to disappoint you."

The creature at the instrument looked at him, and Randall wondered whimsically whether it had recognized the sarcasm.

Then the voice continued, "However, there is the satis—satis—" Even this fantastic Voder could not cope with the hissing sibilance of an "F," so the creature finally substituted: "consolation that our Time Net is working so well. In the end, the law of averages will bring us what we want."

"May I ask," Randall said, "just what it is you want from us? Why you were seining the stream of Time, dragging us back into your own age?"

"We want knowledge," it said. "Our race has found that the method of gleaning information from the future is far preferable to the painstaking and laborious task of slowly gaining that knowledge through millennia of blind searching.

"We want to make our civilization the greatest that ever has or ever will exist. We want to forestall the evolutionary phenomenon in one phase of the future which apparently brought about a retrograde change in our race, and an astounding evolutionary development and ascendance of your species of warm-blooded vertebrates!"

Randall frowned. He couldn't quite grasp the inference of those words. He had read fantastic stories to Time Travel, to be sure. But this was something else again. This was a wholesale pilfering of precious knowledge which only millions of years of miraculous evolution and heartbreaking effort would in the future eventually produce!

And the Kralon spoke of the future, Randall's future, as only a phase of the Times to Come. Did the creature mean that

the past controlled the future at will? That if the past were altered, his, Randall's future, could be wiped out, and a fantastic future of insect supremacy be substituted?

Randall snorted. It was the age-old paradox of the Time Traveler who goes into the past and kills his grandfather. Only in this case, the Kralons were gleaming from a future civilization the knowledge which would prevent the development of that same civilization!

Sublime absurdity! Things which had sprung into being from Time's capacious womb could not be relegated to oblivion merely by the selfish ambitions of the Kralons or any other creatures!

Then Randall remembered with a pang of fear that his own presence in this fantastic world of the past was apparently a contradiction to that same logic. If he and his companions could be catapulted into a time preceding their birth by millions upon millions of years, was it then so fantastic that the Kralons could alter a future which now existed only as a memory of Randall and his companions?

He closed his eyes for a moment, then turned again to the huge creatures who were waiting for him to speak.

"And if we refuse to give you the information you desire?" he asked tonelessly.

The Voder sputtered in an expression of wrath.

"In that case," it said in response to the Kralon's flying fingers, "In that case, we can still make use of those who wish to be obstinate!"

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"We want the secret of atomic power," was the reply. "And the process for neutralizing gravitation. We want the data on methods for varying electronic and nuclear structure of atoms, transmutation of elements, as you call it. We want—"

"But I know nothing of these things!" interrupted Randall. "Even the most brilliant physicists of my time had just learned the rudiments of atomic fission and fusion, and they had as yet not even touched the theory of gravitational neutralization! How can I help you, when apparently your knowledge is greater than mine?"

"We know," was the reply. "Zor Ala seems to be the only one we have thus far

trapped in our Time Net who came from an era in which those phenomena were understood. And so far we have been unable to persuade him to reveal that knowledge."

APPARENTLY the interview was over insofar as Randall was concerned, and the small Kralon returned and led the agent out another door. Randall followed his guide back to the stockade where he was met with a storm of questions from his companions who still waited at the gate. His eyes searched for Blake Garnet.

When he saw that the man who had preceded him to the interview with the Kralons was not among them, he went in search of Zor Ala.

The future-man winced when Randall asked him if he had seen Garnet.

"No," he said in a low voice. "Blake Garnet has not returned. He will never return."

Randall's thin brows lifted. "What do you mean?"

Zor Ala's dark eyes mirrored a world of emotion. "The hunter was a magnificent physical specimen," he replied. "The Kralons have use for such as he."

Then Zor Ala told of the sixteen human beings who had not returned from the interviews; told him of the suspicions he had concerning the fate of those humans at the hands of the Kralons.

Throughout the long afternoon Randall kept a check on his companions.

When Jerome Jackson, the last called, finally returned, Randall spoke up.

"Friends," he said. "Twelve of us went to a forced interview with these fantastic creatures of a long-dead Age. Nine of us have returned. Missing are Blake Garnet, Charles McMahon, and his bride, Evelyn McMahon."

Randall paused, then said softly, "I am calling for volunteers."

Angus McClellan took a step forward which carried him half across the room. Gordon Malherne, the young engineer, wasn't far behind him, and the white-haired Doctor Gerard was surprisingly agile for his sixty-odd years.

Jackson, the salesman, was quivering in indecision, when Laura Hanks, the tallest of the teachers, stepped forward.

"You can count me in," she said firmly, her angular chin set in determination.

The instant protest from the men goaded Jackson, and he stepped sheepishly forward to join the others.

"All right," said Randall briskly. "Here's the setup. As soon as it's dark we'll form a human chain and go over the stockade on the side furthest from the gate. I have an automatic and an extra clip of ammunition. Are any of the rest of you armed?"

All shook their heads.

"No matter," Randall continued. "I'll go over first to cover the rest of you."

"But what'll we do then?" protested Jackson. "Why don't we get some of the rest of the people to help?"

Randall examined the fat little man coldly. "Circumstances determine the move," he said. "As for enlisting the aid of the rest of the colony, one man in the enemy's castle is worth a thousand storming the ramparts. We'll leave here at an appointed time and proceed by different routes, all meeting directly across the enclosure from the gate. Now we'd all better get some rest."

IV

THAT evening when a thin crescent crept wanly into the sky, five figures faded into the ebon night and slunk across the broad field.

When the five had met in the dim shadow of the towering stockade, Randall whispered softly: "When I'm over the barrier, I'll let you know if the coast is clear, then step on it! We're going to try to make it as far as the entrance to the big building. Then we'll decide on our next step. Okay, let's go."

Gordon Malherne braced his hands against the stockade, motioned Jackson to climb on his shoulders. When the salesman was set, Doctor Gerard clambered to his shoulders, and Randall followed up the human ladder with Angus McClellan close behind.

When the two reached the top of the stockade, they wedged themselves between the sharpened ends of two piling, reached down and grasped the Doctor's hand and pulled him up. Then Randall removed his

belt, asked for Gerard's. He buckled them end to end into a strap long enough to reach Jackson's clawing hands. The salesman clung while the engineer scrambled over his body and up the strap, then the three men hauled the perspiring Jackson to the top.

After a quick look below him, the little agent swung over the sharpened ends of the piling, hung by his hands for a moment, then dropped to the ground outside the stockade. In a moment he signalled the others to follow.

Silently they scurried through the night toward the massive central building which McClellan had dubbed "The Hive." Safe in the deeper gloom of its entry, they paused at Randall's whispered command.

"Here's the plan," Randall said softly. "There are half a hundred corridors branching from the main hallway. We'll each explore one corridor, and if anyone finds any clue as to what has happened to Garnet or the McMahons, he'll return to the main hallway at once and wait for the rest. Satisfactory?"

Everyone nodded but Jackson. "That's all very well for you," the fat man protested. "You're armed, but how about the rest of us?"

Randall silently extended his automatic, butt first. Jackson lost any possible remaining respect his companions might have possessed for him when he accepted the gun and turned sheepishly down one of the corridors.

Randall found himself in a narrow, arched passage dimly illuminated by small glowing studs set in the walls. He glanced quickly behind him, then started on a soundless trot down the passage, staying close to the right wall, and pausing occasionally to listen at the frequent panels which broke the monotony of the walls.

Once a panel slid open a hundred feet down the hall ahead of him, and one of the diminutive Kralons emerged and, luckily, started down the corridor away from Randall.

Randall waited until the creature had gained a considerable lead, then followed cautiously. At length he came to an open arch at the end of the corridor, and, in what appeared to be a lounging salon, he saw

a number of the small Kralons busy at enigmatic occupations, their mandibles clacking in weird conversation.

Randall shrugged, turned and made his way back along the corridor. When he arrived at the main hallway, he found Angus McClellan crouched back in the darkness of the entry, waiting for him. The lank Australian grinned weakly.

"Found somethin'," he said huskily. "Don't know what, but I heard human voices. Screams, rather. We'd better hurry."

Randall thought wistfully of his automatic, then nodded and followed McClellan down the corridor until the Australian stopped before a panel and jerked a thumb. Randall put his ear to the panel. For a moment he heard nothing. Then came a scream, a human scream that told of extreme agony; anguish beyond the unbearable pain of the ancient rack!

Randall's face was chalky white as he turned, looked at McClellan for a split second, then rasped, "Let's go!"

Together, they stepped back, then threw their combined weight against the panel.

WHEN Jerome Jackson left his companions and crept sheepishly down the dim corridor with Randall's automatic clutched tightly in one pudgy hand, he came closer to hating himself than he ever had before in all his introverted, cowardly existence.

His mind skimmed back over the miserable pages of his life. Born on the wrong side of the tracks in a mid-western city, he had lacked the innate ability and courage to grow above his inheritance. Rather, he had allowed his childhood handicaps to reduce the advantages of a series of lucky breaks to an extremely mediocre existence. He was a reasonably successful salesman only by virtue of a perpetual hang-dog look which brought a momentary feeling of magnanimity to his prospective customers.

All in all, Jerome Jackson could not under any circumstance be expected to make the most of any situation, much less this almost foolhardy venture which Randall had precipitated.

Jackson realized his own limitations as he crept miserably down the dim corridor,

and was actually regretting that he, rather than Randall had the revolver, when he heard a sound behind one of the panels. Leaning close, he heard the low throb of massive machinery and the high-pitched whine of generators.

He stopped and peered at the panel searchingly. He noticed a glowing stud set in the casement, and after a moment's hesitation he pressed it. The panel slid back smoothly. Jackson looked up and down the hallway, then stepped cautiously through the door.

He found himself in a great high-domed room filled with ordered ranks of mighty but absolutely incomprehensible machinery, all humming enigmatic paens of power. Far down the serried ranks of gargantuan equipment he saw a light glinting on mighty crystal tubes.

With hypnotic fascination, Jackson advanced slowly through the maze of humming mechanisms. The closer he came to those enigmatic tubes, the wider his pale eyes opened, until, as he stood at the base of the rod-high crystal cylinders, he looked like a puppet registering amazement and consternation.

DOCTOR GERARD held neither Jerome Jackson's cowardly fear of danger, nor Randall's contempt for it. While there were important scientific facts to be learned, danger didn't count. It just didn't exist insofar as he was concerned.

Consequently it wasn't at all surprising that Gerard stepped right into a regular hornet's nest of trouble.

The little Doctor had been counting doors on his way down the corridor, more from scientific habit than anything else, and on the seventh door to his right, he noticed a very strange insignia. It was a weird diagrammatic inscription which immediately caught his interest.

Emblazoned in the central panel in glowing outline was a triangle enclosing a huge multi-faceted eye. As Gerard stared at the weird orb in its geometrical figure he suddenly recalled that a similar figure had been used by ancient necromancers and later by hypnotists, as a symbol of their questionable accomplishments.

Puzzledly he wondered whether its use

here in this fantastic world of the past held any esoteric connection with its meaning in the far-distant future. Without stopping to consider potential consequences, he pushed the stud which opened the panel, and stepped inside.

When his eyes finally became accustomed to the even deeper gloom, he saw that the room was filled with a number of coffin-like glass cabinets and an equal number of switchboards crowded with dials and levers. Slowly he edged toward one of the crystal cabinets and peered down into its dimly illumined interior.

He saw a number of oval white objects resting on tiered trays, for all the world like eggs in an incubator. Then Gerard realized that was exactly what these instruments were. Incubators! But they were Kralon eggs, not chicken eggs. Furthermore, it was obvious that the elaborate instruments which adjoined the incubators had a far more involved function than merely maintaining the eggs at incubation temperature.

Doctor Gerard's grizzled eyebrows lifted in interest as he turned back to examine the dials. Both the design of the controls and the hieroglyphics engraved upon them were entirely incomprehensible to him.

He shrugged his shoulders, then began to turn every triangular control on the panel to its extreme limit.

Nothing untoward happened during the alteration of the first two settings, but when Gerard threw over the third, all hell broke loose in that dim crypt!

Violet light danced between the poles of circuit breakers and ate away the metal like butter. Great gongs dinned a cacaphony of sound through the lurking dusk of the room, then were suddenly silent as brilliant lights flashed on.

MEANWHILE, Gordon Malherne had also engineered something for which his text books had provided no solution.

After leaving his four companions, he had started down the corridor furthest to the right.

"Always go right," he told himself whimsically as he crept noiselessly down the dim hallway. "And you'll never go wrong."

However, this must have been the excep-

tion which proved the rule, for Malherne hadn't gone a dozen yards when things started to happen.

A double panel just ahead and to his left slid open and a column of small worker Kralons, two abreast, started marching into the corridor.

The two leaders saw the engineer almost simultaneously, and both started for him with mandibles clacking furiously.

Malherne started on a dead run for the "Hive" entrance. Behind him he heard the harsh rustle of chitin-clad limbs.

It seemed for a moment as though he were gaining, then the foremost insect lunged and caught his jacket. It threw Malherne off stride, and he caromed against the wall of the corridor. He regained his balance almost instantly, but he had lost ground, and he felt another limb clutch his right arm.

He jerked to a stop, pivoted suddenly in an attempt to dislodge the hold. His motion threw the foremost Kralon into the one immediately behind, and the human and the two huge insects went down in a heap.

When Malherne hit the floor under a tangle of limbs, he reached in his pocket and pulled out a knife, snapping the spring blade open in the same motion.

He slashed viciously at everything which touched him, and was rewarded with a raucous clatter of mandibles and the sticky feel of a warm liquid which spattered his hands and face and rendered his knife almost too slippery to hold.

He pulled free from the two mangled Kralons, slashed at a third which had hooked through the fabric of his sleeve. Then he went down as a heavy blow caught him in the temple.

When consciousness pushed through the haze, Malherne found himself back in the stockade. He was lying on a crude bed in the main hut, Zor Ala was bending over him.

"How do you feel?" the man from the 43rd century asked solicitously. "It appears that you encountered a little trouble."

Malherne gingerly felt the lump on his temple. "So I did," he grimaced. "But how did I get here? Did those entomological nightmares really let me live, even after I carved them up?"

Zor Ala nodded somberly. "For awhile, at least," he said. "They intend to drain all knowledge possible from any of the 'fish' they catch from the future before the—" He shrugged, left his sentence unfinished.

"But your companions," he continued. "Where are they?"

Malherne winced. "Still somewhere in the Hive, I guess. I got caught before I got started. Let's hope the others have better luck. I'm still alive, though," he added thoughtfully. He stretched painfully, then sat up, grimacing as the wrenched muscles responded.

"Zor Ala," he said, "how does it happen that these insects are so much further advanced way back here in time, while in my day insects apparently have nothing but complex instincts? Seems as though they should have progressed up the evolutionary scale the same as everything else."

The future-man shook his head, sat down on the crude bench. "No one knows what happened to the Kralons after the Carboniferous Period," he said. "Nor does anyone understand why later insects retrogressed from the logical thinking of the Kralons' level of intellect, back to a mere set of complex instincts."

"We do know that the Kralons made a mighty stride ahead of the rest of Earth life many millions of years ago. They've admitted to me that they have not progressed at all for untold ages now, and they're very worried. They don't know why they do not progress in an evolutionary sense as the rest of the life forms seem to be doing."

"And they are exceedingly worried about the future, for we have let them know that apparently the Kralon race vanished around the end of the Carboniferous Period, leaving only diminutive descendants with instinct rather than intelligence to show that their race might ever have existed."

"Of course, we of the future know that there is another similar parallel in the disappearance of the dinosaurs. As you probably have read in paleontological treatises, those huge reptiles seemed to have had everything their own way through the late Triassic, the Jurassic and the Cretaceous Periods."

The engineer nodded. "I remember a

paragraph from Gamow's 'Biography of the Earth' which I learned by heart," he said. "It went like this: 'The kingdom of giant reptiles, with its innumerable representatives on the land, in the sea, and in the air, was certainly the most powerful and most extensive animal kingdom during the entire existence of life on the Earth, but it also had a most tragic and unexpected end. During a comparatively short period toward the end of the Mesozoic era the tyrannosaurus, stegosaurus, ichthyosaurus, plesiosaurus, and all the other 'sauri' disappeared from the surface of the Earth as if wiped away by some giant storm, leaving the ground free for miniature mammals that had awaited this opportunity for more than 100 million years.'"

MALHERNE paused, reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out the half packet of cigarettes he had been hoarding. He offered them to Zor Ala, and when the other refused, he lit one and inhaled gratefully.

"Then, in conclusion," Malherne continued, "Gamow says that the causes leading to the elimination of all the dinosaurs in a very short period of time are obscure. There are many hypotheses which have been advanced by various scientists to account for it. One theory was that the rising of general ground levels destroyed the inland seas and marshes. But that wouldn't have had any effect on the dinosaurs who had already fully adapted to dry land. Neither would it affect those reptiles who inhabited the oceans. So the whole episode has remained one vast mystery, without much chance of solution."

Zor Ala nodded. "Even in my time we still didn't know," he said. "We had theories that perhaps the tiny mammals of the later Mesozoic were eating the eggs of the dinosaurs to an extent which brought about their eventual extinction. There was also the theory of 'dilution of genetic stock' in a very old race of any life form. That is, through millions of years of reproduction, the hereditary stock of any race eventually becomes so diluted that the cells become 'tired' of dividing. As a result, reproduction dwindles away, and the race dies out. But even that doesn't satisfactorily explain the

geologically sudden death of the dinosaurs."

"Apparently quite a parallel to what must have happened to the Kralons," Malherne observed. "How is it that we don't find clear paleontological evidence of the existence of the Kralons?"

"No calcareous skeletal structure," returned Zor Ala. "They have only a chitinous exoskeleton. Also, you must remember that the dinosaurs held sway for almost 100 million years, and invaded almost every part of the world. In all that time, with the animals existing by the billions in almost every clime, there were naturally a few 'saurs' who fell into asphalt pits or other unusual environments where their bones were preserved for us.

"That is not true of the Kralons, for they seem to have suddenly appeared as the first insect type, sometime during the latter half of the Carboniferous Period, and existed as a race for only a few million years.

"Furthermore, their distribution is apparently very limited. From what they have told me, there are only a few dozen community hives or nations like this one. Thus it is not at all surprising that such an extremely restricted species, possessing no calcareous skeletal structure, left no paleontological evidence."

Malherne considered this thoughtfully. "Then you believe that the insect types of the future are degenerated descendants of the Kralons?" he asked.

"Undoubtedly," returned Zor Ala. "But without the size or the logical reasoning ability of the Kralons. You see, insects apparently arose suddenly during the Carboniferous Period, without any prior evidence of existence in the ages preceding. They seem to be an offshoot from the main line of evolutionary development, and their sudden appearance in geologic history is without precedence in the development of life forms."

Malherne was nodding eagerly. "In connection with that, why is it that an insect goes along in its development, just like a common worm, until it reaches a certain size and age. Then it builds itself a cocoon or chrysalis, becomes a pupa, and starts a sort of 'prenatal' development all over again, but this time emerging as a full-fledged insect? Seems like they've been

given a second crack at development which the other forms of life didn't get."

"That is substantially correct," agreed Zor Ala. "And we of the future have suspected that a higher type of life from somewhere has intervened in the development of life on Earth, and has experimentally given a boost to one branch of Earth-life by showing it how to re-encyst in a secondary 'egg' as a pupa, and thus continue its progress toward a higher evolutionary form before it finally emerges as an adult type."

"Whew!" Malherne ejaculated. "Whoever or whatever did that must really have been supermen!"

Zor Ala smiled. "At least," he agreed.

Malherne was struck with a sudden inspiration. "Look, would it be possible that the Kralons had something to do with the disappearance of the Dinosaurs during the latter part of the Mesozoic? —I understand, of course," he added hastily, "that this period where we find ourselves is around 100 million years before the time when the dinosaurs met their Waterloo. However, isn't it possible that descendants of the Kralons could have retained sufficient intellectual development to have been a serious threat to the existence of the 'saurs'?"

Zor Ala shook his head. "I'm afraid your theory won't stand up," he said. "For the Kralon race apparently only existed for a few million years, disappearing from the surface of the Earth around the end of the Carboniferous period.

"Thus the Kralons must have died out very nearly 100 million years before the dinosaurs' catastrophe, and the giant insects were apparently supplanted by only small, unintelligent prototypes without their size or intellectual vigor. No, there is almost certainly some other reason for the disappearance of the huge reptiles."

Malherne came to his feet suddenly. "Here I am discussing fantastic and fanciful theories, when four of my companions are somewhere in that hive of monsters! I've got to help them!"

"Calm down," Zor Ala soothed. "You would do them far more harm than good, now that the Kralons are watching for you. The best thing to do is to stay here and let them work out their own salvation as best

they can. I know it sounds rather calloused, but any interference on your part now will certainly not be helpful."

"But I can't just sit here!" objected Malherne.

Zor Ala nodded. "I know how you feel," he said. "But you can do your friends far more good alive than—"

He left the sentence unfinished. Then, as if he had been considering something, he continued: "You're an engineer, Malherne, and I think it's time for you to have a talk with Gordo Lanson concerning an idea we have in mind. How do you feel by now?"

"A little creaky," said Malherne, rising and stretching painfully. "But let's get started."

V

HE FOLLOWED Zor Ala out of the central hut and across to a smaller one. At Zor Ala's knock, a voice called, "Come in."

As they entered, Gordo Lanson looked searchingly at the two men, then through the open door beyond them. His expression became concerned.

"What happened to your companions?" he asked. "You ran into trouble?"

Malherne laughed rather embarrassedly. "I don't know about the others," he said. "But I stupidly picked a fight with a whole army of Kralons, and ended up back here, right where I started."

The stocky physicist grimaced. "Well, I'm afraid your companions will have to look out for themselves," he said. "You certainly can't help them by doing something noble and frantic."

"That's what I've told him," said Zor Ala, "and I think he is reluctantly in agreement."

Then he continued, "Malherne is an engineer, Gordo, and I thought perhaps it might be wise to acquaint him with the rudiments of your theory on Time Flux, and to give him an idea of what we have in mind."

Lanson nodded, shuffling the heap of crude parchmentlike sheets in front of him into a stack on the edge of the desk. He motioned toward one of the rough benches.

Zor Ala and Malherne seated themselves, then waited for Lanson to speak.

"As an introduction," the physicist began, "are you familiar with the theory of Teleology?"

"Only that it has something to do with the future affecting the past," said Malherne.

"That is a broad statement of its general implication," Lanson agreed. "And this predicament in which we find ourselves makes it necessary for us to attempt a use of ramifications of that theory. Put it this way," he continued. "If you were positive through an esoteric source of knowledge that a certain event definitely was to happen in the future, would it not affect your reactions to existing environment? Would it not influence your actions in working toward a goal? Would it not thus aid in the fulfillment of that occurrence?"

"You mean that the knowledge would give me courage and confidence to accomplish what I knew would eventually come to pass?" asked Malherne.

"That is one way of putting it," said Lanson. "But it can be stated a trifle more scientifically. 'Let us say rather that the Teleomagnetic effect of such an occurrence induces a tendency in the past to evolve toward such an event.'"

"I think I have it so far," said Malherne, "but it's getting shaky!"

Lanson laughed. "I'll admit it's a little like the perplexity of the 'Flatlander,'" he said, "who was trying to find a way out of a circle which had been drawn around him. He proceeded to investigate his barrier through every dimensional direction known to Flatlanders, which of course were limited to two. He utilized movement through both of those as he followed around the interior of his barrier to the point where he had started."

"Being a very observant and discerning Flatlander, he finally realized he was getting exactly nowhere in his two-dimensional attempts to escape a three-dimensional barrier." Lanson paused, grinned.

"We humans are faced with a somewhat similar difficulty in trying to solve a multi-dimensional problem with three-dimensional thinking. However, there is some precedence for hoping that we can surmount

the obstacle. Remember that mankind, without ever being able to see the interior of an atom, was able to divine the number and function of its component parts, and was finally successful in inducing both fission and fusion of unstable atoms."

Malherne nodded agreement. "But where does this lead us?" he asked rather impatiently. "How is this discussion of obscure theory going to help us escape from the world of the past, back into our own ages?"

Gordo Lanson nodded toward the stack of parchment sheets on the desk, covered with his meticulous figures. "That is an attempt," he said, "to formulate a method for determining the amount of Teleomagnetic energy or influence required to bring about a given distortion in the Time-flux."

Malherne considered this for a moment. "Oh. I think I'm beginning to see," he said. "You are attempting to compute the amount of energy required to return us to the various ages from which we were pulled by the Kralon's Time Trap."

"Something of that sort," nodded Gordo Lanson.

"To answer a question you are undoubtedly thinking," interjected Zor Ala. "We have found, by laboriously gleaning bits of knowledge from the Kralons, the location of the equipment which induces the Teleomagnetic or gravitic energy which powers the Time Trap."

"Where is it?" Malherne asked.

"In one of the laboratory rooms off the main corridor in the Hive," returned Zor Ala. "The Time Net itself is supported on pylons situated outside the Hive building immediately adjoining the Time-Trap generator room."

"What plan do you have in mind?" asked Malherne eagerly.

"Not a fully-formulated one at all," returned Zor Ala. "But each of us is doing whatever he can to further his knowledge of the Kralon's equipment, and all of us are trying to prepare to take advantage of any opportunity which may arise in the future."

"But," objected Malherne, "even the Kralons apparently can't control the Time sector from which they get their victims. By their own admission, they are trying to gain knowledge by picking humans from as

far in the future as possible. But apparently they have been only partially successful, for some of the people they have obtained are from a Time preceding mine. It seems that Gordo Lanson and Dar Mikol and you are three of the few from a period further in the future than my time."

Gordo Lanson nodded. "That is the reason for all this," he said, gesturing toward the stack of sheets on the desk. "I am attempting to formulate a method of controlling the point from which or to which the Time Trap gleans or delivers its victims. Apparently the Kralons have never accomplished that, but I think we can succeed in doing what they could not."

"May the Lord grant that to be true!" said Malherne fervently.

"I regret," said Zor Ala, "that Randall felt it necessary to make his foolhardy attempt to invade the Hive, but of course I understand and sympathize with his reasons."

"He feels entirely responsible for the passengers of the Diamvator, and considers himself obliged to attempt their rescue. However, I am very much afraid that his attempt will be ill-fated."

Lanson nodded. "The Kralons are very intelligent," he said. "And they will have no scruples whatsoever in dealing with troublesome humans. They resent the fact that their own race is to vanish from the surface of the globe in one phase of the future, and that man has supplanted them as the intelligent, governing form of life. And they intend to do something about it!"

Malherne nodded impatiently. "Yes," he said, "but what can we do now? What can we do to help Randall and the rest of my companions? And how can we prepare to use Lanson's theories concerning the Time Trap?"

Both Zor Ala and Gordo Lanson regarded the engineer understandingly. They realized his fear concerning his companions, and sympathized with his frustration in being unable to help them.

The physicist nodded toward the pile of sheets on the desk. "If you remember your calculus," he said, "you could be of great help to us by checking my figures."

Malherne looked uncertainly toward the desk. "I'll do what I can," he said.

WHEN Randall and McClellan threw their combined weights against the panel in the Hive corridor, they had no idea what lay beyond.

The metal sheet bulged, then popped from its guides, and Randall sprawled through the opening, with McClellan atop him.

They found themselves in a room which was shining white from ceiling to floor. In the middle of the room was a flat white table over which several Kralons were absorbed.

Gathered around the central figures were a dozen or more Kralons, apparently spectators. And on the table lay something which Randall knew, from its outlines, had once been human.

Randall looked around for a weapon. A neat stack in one corner of the room caught his eye. There were a dozen or more foot-long metal bus-bars or ingots, apparently spares for fusing electrical circuits.

McClellan followed his glance. Simultaneously both men dove for the bars, each arming himself with one of the twenty-pound metal ingots.

Meanwhile, the room was in a furor. The metallic clack of Kralon conversation sounded furiously, and huge insect figures were converging from all sides.

"Back to back," said Randall tersely, "and let 'em have it!"

The first Kralon who approached the Australian put up a protective foreleg, but the heavy ingot brushed it aside like a matchstick, and crushed the Kralon's head to a pulp. It went down twitching, and the next insect had to scramble over the body to reach McClellan.

Meanwhile, Randall was flailing at two Kralons which were trying to reach him with their vicious claws. Whenever one got in the way, the heavy bar cracked the chitinous shell like that of a crab, and both Kralons drew back, nursing their injuries.

Randall spoke tersely over his shoulder. "Edge over toward the stack of bus-bars," he told McClellan.

Back to back, still flailing with the heavy metal ingots, they worked their way to the corner of the room.

"Use them as missiles," said Randall
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briefly. "Whenever one of the things starts for us, let him have it with an ingot!"

McClellan did, and, with great effect. The heavy metal bars, flying end-over-end toward attacking Kralons, soon convinced the huge insects that another method of attack should be formulated, and the remaining able individuals withdrew to an adjoining room.

Seizing this opportunity, Randall made sure that there was no life left in the form on the operating table, then he and McClellan dashed from the room, back into the main corridor.

A panel at their left opened suddenly, and a Kralon stepped into the corridor.

Randall sent his ingot flying end-over-end toward the huge insect. It was a perfect hit, and the Kralon went down, limbs twitching feebly.

"In here!" said Randall tersely, and McClellan followed him through the opening. They found themselves in a high-domed room filled with huge generators and other elaborate electrical equipment. Massive four-inch conduits led from the generators to a main cable, which in turn left the building through a sleeved opening in the wall.

Through a large window across the room, Randall saw the Time Net on which they had first made their appearance into this strange world. It was stretched like an acrobats' net between four pylons just outside the building. The supporting pylons extended on above the net, forming four towers, between the crests of which was supported a complex skein of intermeshing heavy metallic strands with spherical nodules studding their length every few feet.

Randall nodded toward the massive equipment. "The mechanism for the Time Trap," he said.

McClellan raised his metal ingot suggestively.

Randall shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "We might have use for it." Then he noticed that the generators were operating, and what appeared to be a huge rectifier was humming with a deep vibrant moan, violet light flashing in a dozen huge tubes which reached almost from ceiling to floor.

He nudged McClellan. "It's running," he

said. "The Kralons must leave it in operation all the time in their effort to catch victims from the future."

VI

WHILE Randall and McClellan were deciding what should be done about the Time Trap, Jerome Jackson was standing in open-mouthed awe before the huge crystal cylinders in the room which he had entered.

In the first cylinder was a twelve-foot length of undulating livid flesh which looked exactly like a gigantic maggot.

Then his glance flicked to the next crystal cylinder. In it was a replica of the first.

That is, it was almost a replica. But the exterior covering seemed greyer and thicker, more like a shell than that of the first.

The third cylinder held still another monstrous larva. And its difference was even more apparent. The sickly gray covering was translucent, and through it Jackson could see that the interior of the thing was definitely undergoing metamorphosis.

Following on down the line of crystal tubes, it became quite apparent that these were steps in the pupation of Kralon larvae, for the inhabitant of the tube on the end of the row was our almost fully developed Kralon.

"Artificial cocoons!" thought Jackson. "I wonder if it is necessary for the Kralons to protect all the larvae of their race in this way during development?"

Then Jackson reached a sudden decision. "Why should I risk my neck, just because the rest of them don't respect theirs?" he thought. "I'm going to get out of here!"

On his way from the room he paused curiously for a moment beside the huge control panel, with its myriad triangular controls and dials, but, unlike Dr. Gerard, he held too much esteem for his own safety to chance an impetuous action. Furthermore, destruction of Kralon property wasn't in his plans now.

He left the laboratory room, closing the panel behind him. He scurried rapidly down the corridor to the main Hive entrance. There he looked about cautiously, then crept

across the open space to the foot of the stockade.

He put two fingers to his lips, whistled loudly. "Kralons!" he shouted. "Kralons, can you hear me?"

There was no immediate response, and for several minutes Jackson alternately whistled and called out for the Kralons. Before long, one of the smaller worker insects came rapidly up the path from the Hive and stopped before Jackson.

Then the speaker above the main entrance to the Hive boomed a message. "You will follow the guide," it said.

Jackson did so, and his Kralon guide led the way to a separate entrance a dozen yards south of the main Hive corridor. In a few moments, they again entered the conference room where the comrades had been questioned after their arrival in the world of giant insects.

A few of the council group were present, and the Kralon "Voderist" was ready at the keyboard of the mechanical voice. In answer to the insect's flying fingers, a question sounded in metallic tones: "What do you want?" it asked. "Why are you calling the Kralons? And how did you leave the stockade?"

"I came to warn you," said Jackson. "Four of my companions are hiding somewhere in the Hive, and they will try to do all the damage they can."

The several council members conferred, mandibles clacking.

"We knew of one," the Voder said. "We caught one of your companions in the corridor. After a fight with some of our workers, he was returned to the stockade."

"Well," said Jackson, "there are three more somewhere, and you'd better find them before they cause trouble."

The Kralon who was apparently leader of the council, examined the salesman suspiciously with its many-faceted eyes. He spoke briefly to the Kralon at the keyboard, and the Voder asked: "Why are you telling us these things? Why are you betraying your companions?"

"They're fools!" said Jackson contemptuously. "Even if they have no regard for their own welfare, I value mine. I'd like to make a deal with you."

"What kind of a deal?"

"In return for my safety," replied Jackson, "I will give you information on the activities of the group in the stockade."

Again the Kralons conferred, then the question came: "How do we know that we can trust you?"

"Why not?" asked Jackson. "I have everything to gain and nothing to lose by cooperating with you."

After another short conference, the Voder said: "We find your terms acceptable, and you will be returned to the stockade as if you had been apprehended in the Hive."

Just then, warning gongs sounded brazenly in the conference room, and violet lights flashed a signal above the entry. The Kralons clacked furiously to each other for a moment, then scurried from the room, leaving the smaller guide to escort Jackson back to the stockade.

BACK in the Incubator Room, Doctor Gerard watched in fascination the havoc his actions were producing.

Under the increased intensity of the heating elements and infra-red tubes which normally warmed the Kralon eggs to incubation temperature, disaster was slowly occurring.

The Doctor's handiwork on the dials of the control panel had apparently inactivated the thermostatic controls, and now the eggs were bathed in vicious radiation overtaxed tubes and scorched by overloaded elements. The Doctor was literally cooking the Kralon eggs!

He knew that his interference had set off warning gongs and signal lights, so he discreetly turned from the room and down the main corridor.

When he was halfway to the Hive entrance he heard the metallic clatter of Kralon mandibles ahead of him. He spotted an open panel across the hall, stepped inside and touched the stud which closed the panel.

He found himself in the generator room, with Randall and McClellan looking at him in amazement.

"Hi!" Doctor Gerard said brightly. "What's up?"

"Hi, yourself," said the little gray agent. "Find anything interesting?"

Gerard nodded. "Just cooked the next generation of Kralons," he said proudly. Then he told the two men what had happened in the incubator room.

"Oh—oh!" said McClellan. "The Hive will really be a hornet's nest now!"

Randall nodded. "We'd better make ourselves scarce."

"How?" asked Dr. Gerard.

Randall gestured toward the opening overlooking the Time Net. "Out that way," he replied.

Hurriedly the three men pushed a low table over against the wall under the opening.

Randall climbed upon it. "Better hurry," he said. "You first, Doctor."

Dr. Gerard climbed upon the table, and with Randall's and McClellan's help, pulled himself up into the opening. He hung outside by his hands for a moment, then dropped to the ground below. McClellan was next, pulling his lanky body up to the opening, with Randall boosting.

Settling himself on the sill, he reached a hand down to Randall.

Just then a giant Kralon stepped into the room. Its faceted eyes regarded them for a moment in almost ludicrous surprise. It turned its head, clacked a message to companions in the hall, then scurried rapidly toward Randall, two more Kralons close behind it.

Randall had just touched McClellan's hand when the foremost Kralon caught the table with a hooked foreleg, sliding it and Randall away from the opening.

"Hurry up!" he told McClellan. "Jump!" McClellan hesitated.

"You can't help me alone," Randall urged. "Get back to the stockade and get help!"

McClellan was still undecided. He started to drop back into the room, then as if realizing the truth of Randall's words, he turned and leaped from the opening to the ground below.

Randall stepped calmly from the table to the floor and held his hands above his head in universal gesture of surrender.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Now what?"

The Kralons apparently understood. Without touching Randall, one of them motioned toward the corridor.

Doctor Gerard and McClellan scrambled to their feet outside the building.

"We'd better get help, fast!" said McClellan.

IN Gordo Lanson's hut, Lanson acquainted Dr. Gerard and McClellan with his theory, and told them of his tentative plans.

Dr. Gerard was faintly hopeful, but immediately voiced an objection. "How do you propose to escape the Kralons long enough to acquaint yourself with the operation of the Time Trap, and to perform the necessary experimentation?"

"We thought perhaps you could help us there, Dr. Gerard," said Lanson.

"You're a physiological chemist, are you not?"

"Used to be," admitted Dr. Gerard. "But of late years I have concerned myself more with my avocation of Entomology. That is, it *was* an avocation until I met the Kralons.

"But that isn't the thing of immediate importance," he continued. "The Kralons have captured Randall. We've got to find some way of helping him!"

"That would be pretty hard to do now," said Zor Ala. "The Kralons have turned the spotlights on the stockade, and apparently are sending out guards. I'm afraid Randall will have to take care of himself for the present."

"Say, how about Jackson?" said McClellan.

"He's back," replied Lanson. "According to his story, he was caught in the Hive corridor."

"Too bad," remarked McClellan laconically, leaving a doubt as to what was too bad.

Zor Ala and Lanson grinned appreciatively, but McClellan was deeply absorbed in thought.

"We've got to do something to help Randall!" he insisted. "That's why the doctor and I left him and came to the stockade.—To get help!"

"How?" asked Zor Ala.

McClellan shrugged helplessly.

Then his dilemma was solved by a voice outside the hut which asked: "May I come in?"

"Randall!" shouted McClellan exuberantly.

"How did you do it?" asked Dr. Gerard and McClellan simultaneously.

Randall shrugged. "I didn't," he said. "They just decided that I was entirely harmless, and brought me safely back to the stockade."

McClellan eyed him suspiciously, remembering the agent's flailing metal bar. "That isn't all of it," he accused darkly.

Randall grinned. "Well, not quite all," he admitted. "When they took me to the conference room and questioned me, I inferred I had knowledge of what destroyed their race in the future. I told them that if they would return me to the stockade for consultation with my companions, I would give them that information later. They took me up on it."

Zor Ala was the first to ask: "Do you really mean that you have an idea what destroyed the Kralons?"

Randall nodded. "I think so," he said. "I believe there's a good possibility that it was—"

Just then the door opened again, and Jackson stepped into the hut.

"Outside intervention," completed Randall, regarding the new arrival with expressionless eyes.

Jackson looked at Randall sharply, as if wondering whether the last words applied to him.

"What's up?" he asked. "When did you get back, Randall?—And Gerard and McClellan," he added, seeing the other two men. "How did you make out?"

"Didn't accomplish a thing, unfortunately," said Randall. "How about you?"

Jackson shook his head. "I got caught in the corridor. What's the conference about?"

"We were just discussing—" began Lanson, when Randall interrupted.

"Plans for the future," he completed. "Now how about us all getting some sleep. The night is almost over, and none of us have had any rest."

The others took the hint, and all agreed that it was far past bedtime.

Randall didn't sleep much, but he did rest his weary body in preparation for the day to come.

VII

THE hot yellow sun was just bulging over the eastern horizon as he dressed. He made his way to Lanson's hut and tapped quietly.

After spending half an hour with the physicist, he went to Zor Ala's hut and spent ten minutes with him. Then he went back to the shelter which he shared with McClellan.

"Up bright and early, aren't you?" the Australian greeted him as he entered.

"Rather early, but none too brightly," Randall replied. "I'm getting too old to be frolicking around with a bunch of overgrown ants."

"You aren't alone," agreed McClellan ruefully. He stretched painfully, groaned, then quickly donned his clothes.

"What's on the agenda for today?" he asked.

"Among other things," replied Randall. "I'm going to find out what happened to McMahon and his bride. We already know what happened to Blake Garnet," he added, memory of that silent form on the operating table still vivid in his mind.

Someone rapped sharply on the door, and Jackson stuck his head in. "Lanson asked me to tell you that Zor Ala is sick," he said.

"What's the trouble?" Randall asked.

Jackson shrugged. "He called in Dr. Gerard. He is afraid it's serious."

"Oh-oh!" said Randall. "We would be in a mess with an epidemic on our hands, wouldn't we?"

Jackson's eyes were frightened. "You mean it's contagious?"

"I don't know, of course," Randall answered. "We'll see what Dr. Gerard has to say."

Within a few moments, the three men joined Lanson and Dr. Gerard outside Zor Ala's hut.

"What do you think, Doc?" asked Randall.

"Can't tell for sure," Gerard replied. "My medical knowledge is definitely limited. Furthermore, I have no equipment to make tests, but my diagnosis is meningococcus—cerebro-spinal meningitis."

"Well, will the rest of us get it?" asked

Jackson, edging away from the men who had been in Zor Ala's shelter.

"Could be," said Dr. Gerard seriously. "We'll have to keep him isolated, but I'm afraid some of us have already been exposed. We may have real trouble on our hands."

"What's the remedy?" inquired McClellan.

"Well, sulfonilamide, if we had it," replied Dr. Gerard. "But we don't have any medicine at all."

"What—what will we do?" asked Jackson apprehensively.

The doctor shrugged. "If I had access to a chemical laboratory," he said, "I could synthesize some sulfa, but I doubt if the Kralons would let me use theirs."

"They might, at that," said Randall, watching Jackson out of the corner of his eye. "If they knew an epidemic might wipe out their entire colony of humans after all the work they've done in getting them from the future."

"Maybe they would," said Jackson eagerly. "Should I talk to them about it?"

"Couldn't hurt anything," replied Randall casually. "And it might help."

Together the group made its way to the locked gate in the stockade wall. There they set up a disturbance until a Kralon guard came and unlocked the gate. At the same time the speaker blared: "One human will follow."

Jackson stepped out from the group and followed the Kralon down the path and into the Hive.

"Do you really think the Kralons will let us have access to their chemical laboratory?" asked McClellan.

Randall shrugged. "They might," he said, "if Jackson is convincing enough. I know they don't want to lose all their human guinea pigs."

In less than an hour Jackson was back. "The Kralons said that Dr. Gerard could use the laboratory," he said. "And I'm to help him with his work."

"Okay," said the doctor briskly. "We'd better hurry."

Together, the two men followed the guide back to the Hive.

A few moments later, Randall, McClellan and Lanson joined Malherne in Lanson's

hut. They seated themselves before the crude desk with its pile of figured sheets.

"How does it look?" asked Randall.

"Very good," replied the physicist. "Malherne has checked my figures and they are apparently all right."

"Just how does it all stack up?" asked McClellan.

Lanson ran a hand through his bristling thatch. "Well," he said, "In the first place, from my computations it seems quite apparent that if we reverse the current through the mosaic mesh of the screen above the Time Net, the Teleomagnetic flux should create a stress in the opposite direction to that induced by the Kralons. Thus, theoretically, the direction of the Teleomagnetic or gravitic displacement, acting on anyone in the net, should be forward in Time, rather than backward."

"How about selecting the proper spot in Time?" asked McClellan.

"That is accomplished by the amount of energy, figured in Teleomagnetic magnetons, and interpolated to dynes required to produce a given Time displacement or warp," he answered.

"How about conversion to your system of the readings on the Kralon indicators and instruments?" asked Randall.

Lanson held up a flashlight which one of the humans had had among his possessions. "By checking the standard output of a dry cell against the instruments, and computing the indicator readings in our own terms," he replied.

Randall nodded. "Looks as if you have done quite a thorough job," he agreed. "Now, if Dr. Gerard can do his stuff we may have a chance."

IN the laboratory of the Kralons, Dr. Gerard was having his troubles. The various containers and their enigmatic labels were of course entirely foreign to him, and it was necessary for him to start a basic qualitative analysis, without knowing one reagent from another. However, it wasn't too difficult for him to qualitatively identify sulfuric acid and a few other basic chemicals, and from then on his task was easier.

Jackson was a surprisingly good assistant, although he bothered Dr. Gerard frequently

with questions about the degree of contagion of meningitis.

The doctor did nothing to ameliorate his fear. Rather he spurred Jackson to increased effort by conjecturing upon the havoc the disease could wreak if it reached epidemic proportions.

Twice he called upon the Kralons for more reagents and chemicals. The third time he was questioned at length concerning the quantity he was using.

His explanation was the admission of difficulty in reconciling his own and the Kralon terminology for materials. Thus it was easy to understand, he explained carefully, why he had inadvertently wasted several batches.

But all the time the quantity of white powder in a large cask in one corner of the room was growing steadily. When the cask was finally full, Dr. Gerard called a halt to their labor of synthesis.

"Seems as though that should be enough for an army," remarked Jackson, examining the huge container full of the chemical powder.

"May have to use it on about that many," replied Dr. Gerard brusquely.

While Jackson was busy filtering and running the last batch, Dr. Gerard had fabricated a Venturi tube and a spray nozzle from odds and ends of laboratory equipment. Working rapidly, he filled a large metal container with powder from the cask, then added enough liquid to fill the cask and to dissolve its contents.

Then, with Jackson's help, he moved the cask over beside the air return of the air conditioning and recirculating system for the Hive. He pulled a small table over beside the cask, clamped the Venturi tube and spray nozzle in place, with the nozzle pointing into the return duct. Then he connected a hose from the laboratory water system to the Venturi, and a return hose back to the drain.

The spray worked beautifully, vaporizing the solution and spraying it as a fine mist into the air return duct.

"What's that for?" asked Jackson suspiciously.

"Just arranging decontamination for the Hive so that it'll be safe for us to come here."

Jackson looked at Gerard sharply, but didn't say anything.

It was evening again by this time, and Gerard asked Jackson to see whether the Kralons had some kind of portable lighting equipment, so that he could see to minister to Zor Ala and any others who might need attention.

While Jackson was gone, Dr. Gerard pulled a large carton over in front of his spray system, hiding it quite effectively from casual inspection. He closed the entrance panel, carefully inserting a wedge of metal in the guide which jammed it as it closed.

Then he started down the hall with a container of powder under his arm. Jackson met him in the corridor. The salesman was carrying two transparent globular jars slung from handles. The globes were apparently filled with highly phosphorescent matter, for they gave almost as much light as a lantern.

"How will these do?" Jackson asked.

"Fine," said Dr. Gerard heartily. "Now let's get going."

Back in the stockade a few minutes later he left Jackson with a hurried excuse, conferred briefly with Randall, then went to Lanson's shelter.

By this time things were beginning to add up in Jackson's rather sluggish mental processes, and they didn't come out even. Thoroughly he turned the whole sequence of events over in his mind, reached a decision, then decided to wait until the rest of the human colony had retired for the night, before making a move.

A LITTLE later Randall, McClellan, Gordo Lanson, Dr. Gerard and Malherne were gathered in Zor Ala's hut for a final council meeting to outline timing and strategy for their next moves.

"Remarkable recovery you made, sir," McClellan told Zor Ala with a grin.

The future-man smiled. "Yes," he said. "I believe that Dr. Gerard's medication is quite effective. "It's made me feel much better already, even though it's the Kralons rather than I who are taking it!"

Then he turned to the little investigation agent. "Neat idea of yours, Randall, of synthesizing D.D.T. to fight the Kralons."

"D.D.T.?" asked Malherne, who had not

been a member of this particular phase of the intrigue. "What's that?"

"Dichloro-diphenyl-trichlor-ethane, to use the generic term for the chemical," replied Dr. Gerard. "It's a chemical insecticide that's quite specific for most insects."

"Oh," said the engineer in comprehension. "That's what you were synthesizing instead of sulfonilamide!"

"Right," said the little doctor. "But it *is* a remedy for our troubles, we hope," he added in defense of the deceit they had practiced.

The group chuckled at Gerard's righteousness, even in dealing with inhuman monsters.

"How long do you think it will take for the chemical to have a material effect on the Kralons?" inquired Lanson.

"Shouldn't be too long," interposed Dr. Gerard. "Unlike the insects of our own times, these creatures have had no opportunity to build up an immunity, nor time to mutate as a race to types resistant to chemical insecticides. Therefore its effect should be considerably more rapid than upon even the small insects of the future."

Zor Ala nodded in satisfaction. "The floor is yours, Randall," he said.

Randall stepped to the center of the group. "We are apparently all in agreement that the zero hour is to be set at 4:00 AM, or 1600 in universal time. That should give sufficient time for the DDT to accomplish its work, and we do not dare delay beyond then for fear that Dr. Gerard's contrivance will be discovered in the morning, thus alerting the Kralons."

He paused a moment, his pale gray eyes flicking from one member of the group to another. "It might be wise to keep an eye on Jackson in the meantime," he said. "He undoubtedly has had time to think things over, and to have concluded that Dr. Gerard's fake synthesis and subsequent actions weren't quite plausible under the circumstances."

"How did you happen to suspect him in the first place?" asked McClellan.

Randall smiled faintly. "It was quite obvious that the salesman lacked courage," he replied. "We all were fully aware of that. Also, both by profession and inclination, Jackson was an opportunist.

"In my dealings with the renegades of society, I have always found that to be a deadly combination. A cowardly opportunist can almost always be expected to turn traitor to a cause which offers him any particular inconvenience. Also," he added, "the Kralons asked me several questions about Jackson which set me thinking."

Lanson nodded. "He very clearly gave his position away when he so willingly volunteered to contact the Kralons with our request," he said. "We certainly have you to thank for preventing us from exposing our plans before him. You were particularly adroit in utilizing his treacherous contact with the Kralons to our advantage."

As the other members nodded agreement, Randall shifted uneasily. "I didn't do much," he said briefly. "Dr. Gerard did all the work. But the hardest part is still ahead of us. The DDT, at best, is only going to make the Kralons lethargic and slow in the time we have allowed. Even if they don't suspect something and vacate the Hive before the chemical-laden air affects them adversely. In any event we will have many problems to solve.

"Let us outline briefly the tasks assigned to each of us, and formulate a time schedule of action, starting with 4:00 AM as the zero hour."

He turned to Zor Ala. "You are to make such contacts with the other humans of the colony as you feel advisable, and you will organize several parties from those you feel you can trust. Have them gather in small groups on either side of the main gate, staying in the shadows of the stockade wall. Be sure they are ready at one minute to four. Have the members armed with any weapons you can devise."

Then he continued, outlining carefully the assigned plan of action and time schedule for each individual.

VIII

OUTSIDE, behind the low hut, Jackson strained his ears to catch Randall's words. With an innate animal cunning, he had finally surmised most of the intricate plot, and had crept to his vantage point shortly after the meeting in Lanson's shelter had begun.

However, Jackson was still faced with the problem of escaping the surveillance of his human companions long enough to contact the Kralons and acquaint them with the plot. He realized that if he made sufficient noise to attract the huge insects, he would be intercepted and subdued before he could accomplish his objective.

Then his dilemma was suddenly solved by the mechanical voice of the Voder. Amplified by the speaker, it called out in hesitant, somewhat garbled accents: "The hu-man called Jack-son will come to the gate im-med-iately."

With a glance around to see that none of his companions were close enough to intercept him, Jackson made a run for the gate. When he arrived there, the Kralon guide had already unlocked it and was waiting for him. Rapidly it led the way up the beaten path to the Hive entrance and down the long corridor to the conference room.

The Voderist sat ready at the instrument, and it was evident that the Kralon was maintaining its posture with difficulty. The DDT was apparently having a pronounced effect.

A number of the council members were present, and they too seemed to be showing effects from the chemical. But their multi-faceted eyes regarded the salesman with unmistakable enmity.

"Human," said the Voder in tones as severe as possible for the mechanical contrivance, "what trickery have you and your companions used to poison the air of the Hive?"

"I didn't," denied Jackson, shrinking back from the virulence of those inhuman eyes and the very real menace of the huge pincers.

Back in the stockade, Randall and his council members had heard the Kralon voice, and had seen Jackson disappear with the guard. The agent was sick at heart, for he knew that this meant the destruction of all their carefully formulated plans.

If they had only had a few hours more, the DDT would certainly have rendered the Kralons vulnerable to attack.

Randall quickly conferred with his group. Following the directions the agent gave,

Malherne ran back to one of the shelters and brought rope.

Randall handed the rope to McClellan without comment. The Australian silently improvised a hondo, made a loop, and twirled it skillfully. He tossed it over the top of one of the piling, watched it settle into place, then tugged it tight.

Randall was halfway up the rope before anyone could object. He gained the top of the stockade, dropped to the ground on the other side. Hastily he located the massive bolt which barred the gate and stood on his toes to reach it. The Kralons had not constructed it for human manipulation, and Randall was having trouble.

As he glanced back over his shoulder he saw several Kralon guards start down the path toward him.

"Be ready for a fight," he called through the wall to his companions, "as soon as I get the gate open. The guards are coming."

It wasn't until the Kralons were within a dozen yards that the bolt finally gave under Randall's frenzied efforts, and the gate swung open. Then out streamed a motley mob of determined humans, with Dr. Gerard leading. He held his container ready, advancing toward the approaching Kralons. He waited until they were within a few feet, then dashed the contents of the container at their heads.

Randall never knew whether it was partially the effects of the insecticide or purely the virulence and vicious determination of the band of humans which finally overcame the Kralons. But as soon as he saw that both were down, limbs thrashing, he led the group to the Hive entry and down the huge corridor.

He almost grinned as he thought of this ludicrous army storming the ramparts of a fantastic race in the dim forgotten past, for the motley human crowd from a dozen different ages brandished clubs, stones, and knives, and McClellan was twirling his improvised lariat.

Quickly the agent found the entry to the Time Trap laboratory and opened the panel. The Kralon guard didn't have much chance, for it was already lethargic from the effects of the DDT, and the milling mob of humans soon swarmed over its prostrate figure.

Wasting no time, Gordo Lanson rapidly began his check tests with the drycell, calling out his readings to Malherne who noted them down on the white wall.

Meanwhile, Randall was determined to find out definitely what had happened to the McMahons. Calling McClellan, he left the Time Trap laboratory and led the way to the operating room. No trace of any form there.

From room to room they searched. Finally they arrived at the council room door. Randall opened it and stepped in, McClellan close behind him. What he saw brought the gorge to his throat, injured though he was to dealing in violence.

It was quite apparent that Jackson had failed to sell the Kralon Council the truth of his innocence. Their final acts had been to exact retribution.

SLOWLY the two men turned away, then continued their search for some sign of the McMahons. And Randall knew then, with a sudden flash of insight, that the phase of the future to which he and his companions would soon return would not know the names of Blake Garnet, Jerome Jackson, or Charles and Evelyn McMahon. He knew with an esoteric knowledge that in that particular future there would have been just seven Diamvator passengers and himself scheduled on the historic trip. And he was somehow sure that the passenger check list would substantiate that count.

For it would be an alternate phase of the future, rather than the one in which those people had, or might have existed. Those four personalities would henceforth exist only as a memory in his mind. And perhaps it wouldn't even be strictly a memory. Perhaps it would be a dream; an ephemeral and elusive link between alternate potential Time phases.

There was a fantastic thought! Perhaps all dreams were but vague links between Time potentials or alternate phases.

Then Randall impatiently thrust aside the fanciful theories and turned to the search.

The room he and McClellan now entered was quite obviously a genetics research laboratory. And it was there that they found unmistakable evidence of the two young McMahons.

They examined the grisly proof that the young couple had been victimized by vicious Kralon experiments. Apparently the research was aimed at the use of human gene-determinants in synthesizing a greater Kralon race.

In the next room Randall found a case filled with metallic sheets covered with hieroglyphics. Feeling that the records might hold information of value to Zor Ala and Lanson, the agent removed the first sheet and took it with him.

Back in the Time Trap room he called it to Zor Ala's attention, and while Lanson and Malherne were busily completing their transpositions and calibrations, the future-man excitedly examined the record.

"It's written in Ulla!" he cried. "The Universal written language adopted in the 30th Century for documentary purposes. Where did you find it?"

Randall led the way back to the room where he had found the records. Zor Ala avidly began to read the information contained in the file, making notes from time to time on his mechanical pocket recorder.

Meanwhile Randall wandered from room to room, finding that the DDT had done a thorough job, for nowhere did he find a sign of life in the motionless Kralon corpses.

When he finally returned to the vault, Zor Ala looked up from his work and took a deep breath.

"Randall," he said, his fine eyes shining with an almost evangelical light, "this is a summary of the most magnificent revelation in the history of the universe!"

On the way back to the generator room Randall plied him with questions, but Zor Ala was so deep in thought that he didn't even hear them.

As they re-entered the Time Trap laboratory, Malherne and Lanson looked up from their work. At Zor Ala's gesture they paused in their labor, and the rest of the humans waited for his words.

"Friends," he said, his splendid head held proudly, and his deep voice rich with the surge of mighty emotion, "before we again return to our various ages, it is important that all of us know the most astounding story that it has ever been the privilege of mortal men to hear."

While the crowd fell silent within the room, and those in the corridor crowded closer to hear his words, Zor Ala continued:

"It is the story of Man in all his glory! It is the story of a superb race of men who exist so far in the future that my own age is antediluvian by comparison. It is the stupendous history of that race's realization of the ultimate goal of Life; a goal so tremendous that its concepts were staggering, even to those supremely mature minds!"

Zor Ala paused, drew a deep breath, then went on.

"Those far distant future-men knew that goal to be far more important than any one life or any one race or any galaxy. They knew that no effort should be spared in its ultimate accomplishment.

"That infinite purpose transcended even individual or racial survival, and this almost divinely intelligent and benevolent race knew that the history of Life's development must be reviewed; must be re-examined to determine whether Mankind was the most suitable vehicle for its eventual attainment.

"Following this postulate, they developed the science of Dimensional Time, and devised equipment for investigating the past. There, their first test of Man's fitness for the ultimate purpose was to aid forms of life other than Man.

"First they set up elaborate scientific equipment to provide an artificial evolutionary leap ahead for one form which had diverged from the main stem.

"Knowing full well that if this life-form progressed, Man's whole future would undoubtedly be replaced by an alternate future of insect supremacy, this super-race without hesitation continued its work of producing a tremendous artificial advancement for the rudimentary invertebrates.

"THEY accomplished this objective by inducing a re-encystment or pupation which carried the invertebrates up the evolutionary ladder countless millions of years in a single stride!

"They fully realized that if their help was successful in aiding this life-form to reach ascendance, that Man's phase,—their phase of the future—would no longer exist. But they knew that the infinite importance

of the ultimate goal must be placed above all else!

"Thus the Kralons sprang suddenly from low invertebrate stock which had strayed off as a branch of the main evolutionary stem. But they were an artificial race, raised to their pedestal among other life-forms by outside help, rather than through sturdy, solid evolutionary progress."

Zor Ala paused while his audience looked at each other soberly, all realizing that the Kralons had failed the splendid chance which had been offered them by the almost divine race of the far distant future.

And then they realized that they themselves had played a part in the cosmic scheme which once again was assuring Man of his place in Life. They had helped to forge another link in the chain of evidence pointing toward the conclusion that Man and Man alone was to be selected to reach that ultimate goal!

Zor Ala continued!

"The investigators assigned by the super-race were not content with testing only this single life-form against Man's development. They combed the infinite past, selecting various promising genera to aid; hoping, always hoping in their hearts that Man himself would emerge from the tests as the chosen species, but never allowing that hope to influence their work.

"They helped man, very many species with well-planned steps; a help which Man's

progenitors never had. They implanted determinant genes in a certain reptilian branch which eventually produced the mighty dinosaurs' great size; reasoning that the advantage of protective size might allow this life-type to evolve toward the heights.

"But the reptiles also failed their chance, possibly even as the Kralons are failing theirs. Perhaps, like the Kralons they were not satisfied with all the help the future had already given them. Perhaps they, like the selfish insects, again reached forward in Time for more and more unearned information, thus bringing back the elements of their own destruction!"

The listening humans exhaled almost as one. This was a concept so vast that it was almost mentally painful; yet so glorious in its implications for Man that every heart felt the surge of a mighty emotion.

Randall looked around at his companions. On every face he saw the glory of tremendous purpose.

No longer would they blunder through Life with fumbling and despairing uncertainty. No more would hollow frustration gnaw at searching minds which eternally wondered: "Why survive? For what purpose? What is our destiny?"

Now they knew! Now the distant view of a magnificent purpose would be always before them, filling them with a vast serenity coupled with a mighty incentive. Whence now, little man? Onward!

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 55)

knifers are as welcome as the back-patters. However when one gripes or praises we do like to learn the whys and wherefores. To that end, I must say that your letter—after serious opening challenges—makes one of the most hurried exits in the history of VIZI. Get tired, John?

BENEATH THE SKIN

61 Eastern Parkway,
Brooklyn 38, N. Y.

Dear Editor,

Having been an interested spectator of the bi-monthly battles in The VIZIGRAPH (I won't call it La Vizi for all the Zaquil on Jupiter) for a long time, I finally feel like adding my three cents to the fray. Getting out my secretary, I proceeded to dictate this missive.

With apologies to the erudite Mr. J. Dean Clark, the sometimes poetic Mr. Paul Mittelbuscher, the humorous-indignant Mr. Joe Keogh, and the charming (I'm sure) Miss Carol McKinney, I hereby will swing my first punch.—WHAT THE H—L DOES IT MATTER WHAT PLANET STORIES LOOKS LIKE?? If it were pocket-sized (with repeated apol to all those who term this a dirty word) or larger than it is now, or if it were slick not pulp, or cut-edged or not, as long as it contained the same caliber stories, and The VIZIGRAPH I would still buy it.

Now to throw my second punch and then to duck fast. In my reading of Science-Fiction (I won't call it s-f for all the Mgatl on Jupiter), I often (once a month) read GALAXY (also ASTOUNDING, IF, IMAGINATION, etc.) I buy and enjoy 6 or 7 magazines (not mags, and I certainly wouldn't say pulpzine or sfzine for all the Bracilf on Jupiter) a month. This keeps me broke, but more informed than if I just read one (this for them as how read only PLANET). PLANET is good, but other views help.

DAVID SPIELHOLZ

P.S. (This stands for post script not PLANET Stories.)

Letters—1) Edward L. Morton

2) Joe Keogh

3) John G. Fletcher

And a special award (the author of the story she praises) to Mrs. James McKimney, Jr.

Stories—1) THE LOST TRIBES OF VENUS
(and who did the great cover?)

2) THE PRIMUS CURSE

3) JAMES P. CROW (?)

Worst was SKELETONS OF SPACE

d.

Ed's Note: Cover artist for May ish was Kelly Freas.

A DRIBBLER'S COMMENTS

318 East Commercial Street
Appleton, Wisconsin

Dear Editor,

A conservative soul wouldn't read PS. Speaking of PS, I notice that all the oddballs who write letters call your mag PLANET. Such energy. I prefer the two-letter method. Saves wear and rip on the machine. I have something to say to you that I might or might not remember to stick in. I blushing

confess to being the most hideous of all criminals. A Dribbler. I read a mag and decide to write a letter.

First I think of something intelligent to discuss. Then I sit down and start typing. Anytime from a day to a month, after I mail it out I remember what I forgot to say in the letter. For example, when I started this missive it occurred to me that a faintly amusing letter describing (Noah must hate me!) the various diseases a faned suffers from that I sent to *Startling* three weeks ago had originally started out to be a serious argument disagreeing with certain statements made in an article on three-valued logic. And I defy anyone to top that last sentence for sheer clumsiness.

I have jolly memories of a letter I sent out your way about two months ago. You might even print it two months from now. I hope so. It would live on LA VIZI no end. (Even expurgated.)

Letters: won . . . Paul Mittelbuscher
too . . . Evelyn McLean
tree . . . Bill Tuning

Won, too, tree? Oh, Courtois, you wizened, woofing wit, you!

The rest of this will be thoughts inspired by the Paul of Mittelbuscher. Apparently Paul has the wrong slant on IMAGINATION. MADGE is one of the lily white mags John (wonderful name) G. Fletcher talks about. When the Wizz Kids get to be eleven years old, Momma decides they are too old for comic books. Since they are also too young for sex, Momma won't let them read the awful stories that must be in those pulp mags with the horribly vulgar covers. The Wizz Kids with muscles read BOY'S LIFE. The others read MADGE. (Don't change the spelling. I prefer this way.)

Howwhatsoever, the rest of his letter is so true, at least part of it. I met a BNF a few days ago. We talked a while and eventually the lusty name of PS was dragged into the conversation. The BNF looked bashfully down at his L&M and muttered something I couldn't hear. I hastily assured him that I too read PS. He gulped in relief, looked up at me, and said, "Well, you know some fen look down on . . ." ROT, ROT, ROT!!!! What has fandom ever done that gives it the right to feel superior? Not a damn thing, thass what!

I have no sympathy for the hot and itching peoples who are trying to make a Noble Cause out of fandom. Noble Causes are fine and framping for martyrs and repentant sinners, but I'd rather enjoy life.

To me fandom is a cheerful place where you can let your hair down. The main purpose of fandom is, or it should be, personal enjoyment. If a fan is most happy when he is killing himself working on seventeen fanzines, well HOOBOY and HOORAH for him. But not all of us are that energetic. I am only a semi-active fan. I buy all of the prozines and some of the fanzines. I write letters to proeds when I have something to say and I write to faneds when they have something to say. I write irreverent comments to friendly inebriates I met via fandom.

This, to me, is fandom. A place where I can rollick with jolly lads. Fandom is also the best possible place for a fledgling young writer. It is hard to describe the feeling you get when you pick up a mag and see the name of someone you have been corresponding with right there on the contents page. If you've been harboring doubts as to your own ability, it gives you a shot in the arm. If you haven't been writing as much as you should, it gives you a good kick in the pants. Either way it is

what you need to keep trying. I hope to start selling my stories soon. Without fandom I would never have started writing them.

Still, there are some things I don't like about fandom. The main one being the snobbish attitude of some fen. There is nothing I detest more than a snob. There are fen who sneer at anyone who hasn't been a fan as long as they have. There are fen who sneer at those who are less active than they are. I don't like it. I have said it before and I intend to keep right on saying it. I am not a crusader or a reformer. But I'll be damned if I'm going to pretend that a fan must be A Chosen One simply because he is a fan. BNFies don't scare me. They don't even impress me. There is room in fandom for almost everything except prejudice and snobbery.

I have yet to run into any prejudice except the outrageously exaggerated drivel I slobber all over everything. But there is snobbery. There is a simple way of testing your own snobbish tendencies. Do you welcome neofen (the more the merrier!) or sneer at them (neofen? Oh... those).

Ah well, such are the vicissitudes of life and love.

Toujours gai,

JOHN COURTOIS

Ed's note: "Defy" is absolutely right. Including Noah.

B & F—KEEP 'EM COMIN'

2637 Orrington Avenue
Evanston, Illinois

Dear Mr. O'Sullivan,

On the subject of Freas, don't let him get away: keep him doing covers and interiors for PLANET (and maybe even a cover for JUNGLE STORIES, where he has had some nice interiors?), as he is one of your main selling points. I can think of several issues of PS in the last year which I would never have bought if it had not been for his covers and interiors. The one on the latest issue is one of his finest so far—very moody and mystic-seeming.

Keep the Leigh Brackett stories coming, too. And if you can get any of her "galloping fantasies," by all means do so! She says the market has dropped out of the bottom (er, you know what I mean!) for that sort of thing, but as long as PS is still around that certainly shouldn't be the case! We haven't had a good story in that vein since "Shannach—the Last." But her more recent stories have been swell, too. Leigh Brackett in any style is better than no Leigh Brackett at all!

Sincerely,

ROBERT E. BRINEY

THE NAME'S THE SAME

2444 Valley St.
Berkeley, Calif.

Dear Editor,

Just a few words on the May issue.

Couldn't find the cover credit anywhere, though I'd venture a guess it was Kelly Freas. In most of the magazines he works for, you can occasionally tell just by the bubbles he throws in. The picture itself was very pleasing, everything blending in nicely except the big red-and-white PLANET STORIES and that little red ball in the lower right-hand corner.

Good idea you've got, linking the name of the artist with the author of each story. So it's not world-shaking, it's a good feature. But as I smile over this change, I bemoan the news that you are now

in the ranks of the "four times per years" boys. Long have I praised your schedule as being very steady and unchanging. Now, you go and make a liar out of me. But I suppose a quarterly is just as steady as a bi-monthly.

Eberle came up with two good illos this time. By the way, I can't remember if he's appeared in PLANET before. Only place that he's an old-standby is at WEIRD. But no matter how you look at it, Vestal is your best artist. Off-hand, it would seem that Emsh should be the top-dog, but he doesn't come up to his high standards when down at PLANET. But such is the law of economics. You can't eat complimentary copies for breakfast, though I'll admit that your edges look almost as good as shredded wheat.

On page 38 I see there is a story written by Evelyn Goldstein. Is this the same Evelyn Goldstein that is married to the infamous Horace Gold? His wife's name is Evelyn. And Gold and Goldstein sound so much alike that I can't let it pass without a sly remark. But then there's the matter of Sol Galaxan. . . . And Gold does edit GALAXY. And this Bill Wesley must be the pen name for Dean Grennell who sometimes goes by the monicker of Art Wesley in fanish circles. It seems that I'm going around in fanish circles, too.

Haven't gotten around to reading THE LOST TRIBES OF VENUS, so I can't call that one yet. I never read the long ones until I have a lot of time, and going to school takes a bit of that time away. But I read the shorts.

JAMES P. CROW, it seemed to me, was rather good. Dick never comes up with a story that I can't read. But I don't rave about too many of his stories either. This James P. Crow, is he the same Crow that's in the distilling business?

SKELETONS IN SPACE by McKimmey was good, too. It ended rather appropriately, eh? I think this Tiege would make a good editor. He's got just the right type of temperament. He could cuss out people at the drop of a hat, and I betcha he'd be expert in the fine art of mutilating manuscripts.

LAND BEYOND THE FLAME by this gal Goldstein. The illo was better than the story, I think, but that's not panning the story. I like Vestal, and think he can do no wrong. While this gal Goldstein.

Didn't read the last short, so I'll be honest and not spout on about it. Which reminds me of a letter I got from a participant of LA VIZI who said, "Me read PLANET? Just 'cause I comment on the stories doesn't mean I read the thing." If it wasn't so funny, it'd be humorous. (?)

Joe Keogh, who I called Joe Blow (I will never leave the country on account of that one, but it still annoys me), has the best letter. Intelligent person, Keogh. I like what he says, and agree with him most of the time. About that "Dear Sir, Dear Editor, Dear Jack, Jack, etc.," I think we should all be uniform. That's something that should stir up a bit of comment. Shall we, or shall we not all start our letters "Dear Editor"?

Next is Burton Beerman's thing. I disagree with him, though, on his 4th paragraph. I, for one, keep pretty strict tabs on the magazines up at the newsstand. I can tell who has been looking through PLANET for the lewd pics (bet they were surprised) and pornographic material. The guy up at the store should pay me. I do enough work for free up there. Tenderly placing PLANET in front of ASF, GALAXY, etc., I spend much time in his establishment. He's trying to get me interested in the western shelf 'cause it looks pretty shoddy.

Last is this guy Fletcher. Why, I don't know. Just too tired to look any farther in hope of finding better.

Being that I'm starting to appear semi-irregularly, I think that I'm about ready to start tearing into your mag left and right. But I can't, because it pleases me. But unlike a person in one of your letters who said PLANET's better than ASF, I will not rave about it either. I like it, but I like a lot of things.

Yours 'til you go bi-yearly,

DON WEGARS

WHEN VAL MEETS VIZI

6438 E. 4th Pl.
Tulsa, Okla.

Dear Editor,

Since my Phil. prof at Tulsa U. seemed to have forgotten the homework tonight I'm taking this opportunity to drop a line to sweet lovable little P.S.

Haven't read the stories yet, but I did enjoy Brackett's gem MARS MINUS BISHA in the issue before.

My chief topic tonite shall be the letter column.

I am most happy to report that I have made a complete about face in the last month or so as regards fan columns. Just keep the letter columns, Jack. The reason for this about face has been some little fanish incidents that have convinced me that fen are fairly worthless people. The only place for a real fan is Saps or FAPA.

I offer my most humble apologies to Evelyn McLean for whatever I said that seemed to be sarcastic. I seem to get that way once in awhile. I suppose it is just another way of rejecting reality. I would say, off-hand, a better way than the large part of fandom, however.

Passing thought: I'll bet the mailman hates Carol McKinney.

Edw. L. Morton had a very enjoyable letter.

Note to J. G. Fletcher. I doubt if you agree with Val on fan columns any longer. While I'm on his letter may I suggest that unless anyone has something worthwhile to say about sex, let's drop the subject. It is becoming slightly obnoxious. The subject? No. But all the talk about said subject. May I say only that sex is all things to all people. To some people it is a natural event, a natural happening, to others something to be whispered about, to others, something to glory in. These feelings are a natural part of a person's culture feelings. Also his environment. As long as this is true it is a little bit silly to attempt to change or argue about changing the outlook toward sex. If one wants to change our particular culture's outlook on sex, they must start at the basic roots, not on the covers of science-fiction magazines and the plot content of science-fiction stories. For science-fiction carries about the impact of a feather against a brick wall in our present civilization status. Okay, I didn't mean to rave so much.

I didn't know they let things like Tuning in college. So Tuning thinks that there are no writers around today who recognize people's drives and emotions. My God, boy, wake up and live, read a little bit more than science-fiction and Bradbury. Writers today are writing more about people, real people, their drives and feelings, than ever before. Try reading Dorothy Baker, Robert Musil, Isaac Rosenfeld, Elisabeth Pollet, Shelby Foote, Shirley Ann Grau, James T. Farrell, James Jones, Christopher Isherwood, Tennessee Williams, Ivan Gold and any number of others who are contributing such great writing to The Partisan Review, Accent, New

Directions and the Mentor Editions of New World Writing.

Re your sixth paragraph— There are some forms of sex that are vice. Sex and vice are as inseparable as ham and eggs. Sex is vice when it is perverted. There is no escaping that point. There is sex that is natural, usually out of love or passion. Do you think people that are uninhibited love life? No. You might call the communists uninhibited in so far as morals and ethics go, but they love no life but their own. And as long as a man loves no one but himself, that man cannot be happy.

Oh man! Have you ever got a lot to learn. "Love is almost entirely physical." That is the asinine statement of the year. You are mistaking passion for love, they are entirely two different things.

That is one reason so many of today's marriages end in divorce. People mistake passion for love. Passion for a person can last at the longest two years. (Psychology and Life-Ruch) Love is the understanding of a person, feeling in sympathy with a person. A marriage cannot exist, happily, on passion alone. It can exist, reasonably happily, on love alone. The best marriage would be a blend of the two. Just as a man cannot exist by reason alone, nor by emotion alone, there must be a blend.

The philosophy Mr. Tuning is following is hedonism—which is an animal philosophy based on the assumption that pleasure is the chief purpose of life.

Excuse me for rambling on, Jack.

Keep PLANET rolling the way it is and it will continue to be one of the five or six s-f mags that get my money every month or two.

VAL WALKER

APOLOGY BEFORE THE BLAST

347 Oak Road
Glenside,
Pennsylvania

Dear Ed,

It certainly came as a surprise to see my letter published. Much more of a surprise to see what I wrote about Finlay doing only black and whites. Right now I'd like to apologize for that. I have located several of Finlay's covers. My apologies to all, including the half of fandom that's going to blast me any day now.

Some fans think,
It's McKimmey's stink,
But others agree,
It's Bill Wesley.

But I must say,
In a kind-hearted way,
The story was signed,
Miss E. Goldstein.

Yes sir, the first story I read in thish (May) of PLANET was LAND BEYOND THE FLAME. The story idea was terrific, interesting, something fascinating, but the writing was jerky and failed to hold my interest.

Nourse's yarn was the best to cover your pages. But the illo by EMSh spoiled the whole thing. As a matter of fact, every illo by EMSh was shot. No good. He just doesn't take on the pages of PLANET.

But Freas took perfect in every detail. Beautiful. The drawing for the LOST TRIBES OF VENUS was executed wonderfully. There's something about it that I like. (His style I mean, not the femme.)

The cover was striking. The shades of blue created quite an eerie effect.

The letters for this time: 1) Carol McKinney, for her worthy cause that every true fan should help out in; 2) Don Wegars, who likes the cardboard hero;

3) Mrs. James McKimney, Jr., for her joyfully long praise of her husband. (I would have voted for myself, but, you know. . .)

I enter my vote with Carol McKinney for Fanzine reviews.

And now I must drag myself from the typewriter, we go.

Farewell,

JOHN G. FLETCHER

P.S. I'm curious. Does a picture winner get an original from the ish his letter was in or from the ish that it's announced he wins in? Thanks.

JOHN GEB

Ed's note: From either the issue in which his letter appeared or the issue about which he or she wrote.

PASSENGER OVERBOARD!

Oak Ridge, N. J.

Dear Sir:

I just finished reading the VIZIGRAPH in your May issue, and I have a complaint to make.

I am complaining about all the complaints people make about the stories they read. It seems to me that they are very hard to please. I haven't been reading sf very long but I read every thing I can get my hands on. There are very few stories that I have read that I can say I did not like. Of course, some I liked better than others.

A lot of your readers will say that I don't know the difference between a good story and a bad one. Perhaps that is so or maybe it is just that I am easy to please. I read sf (in fact, I devour it) for enjoyment and I get plenty of that but it seems to me that a lot of people read it to see what they can find fault about.

I have some ideas for some stories and would like to try my hand at putting them on paper but when I read the complaints and criticisms that are thrown at the established writers, it scares me. They would probably tear a newcomer to shreds. Their opinions naturally determine what stories you will print so what chance has an amateur when they find fault with the professional writers?

There is only one complaint I have against sf mags in general. I hate to pick up a mag with an exciting cover on it and find that there are no stories inside to go with the cover!

What's all the controversy about the style of your mag? Who cares whether you have smooth paper, or rough edges; or big or little size? Print it on rolls of tissue paper and I'll still read it.

When I read Evelyn McLean's letter, how I sympathized with her. She and I are in the same boat only MY friends and husband don't think I am foolish for reading sf; they think I'm nuts! I

I might as well end this on a cheerful note by saying that I enjoy your mag very much.

Sincerely yours,

MRS. RICHARD LEEK

Ed's note: Write on, Mrs. Leek, and be not of faint heart. Those ferocious-sounding scribes are in reality very gallant friends.

WATER CARNIVAL

377 East 1st North
Provo, Utah

Dear Jack,

Congrats on the most outstanding ish of PLANET to appear since you became ed! You really outdid

yourself this time. You know, the only trouble with giving us all those surprisingly good stories bound together under one beautiful cover is that we're going to expect it of you every time. And of course we are going to be disappointed. Or maybe we won't—?

Speaking of the cover again—what a gorgeous thing it was, and naturally I don't merely mean the curvaceous member of my own sex. Usually when I pick up a new PLANET the cover gets only one glance. But this one for May—! Had to stop and let my imagination rove beneath the Venusian sea. . . . What is it about a pic that shows figures in action beneath the surface of water that holds the attention longer than if the same figures were on dry land? Or maybe it's that way only for those who call swimming their favorite sport? Whichever way you look at it, the May cover was the best you've ever had.

As for the story the cover depicted, THE LOST TRIBES OF VENUS, it was not only the best in this particular ish, but in any ish during the past 4 years. Erik Fennel's tales are always so imaginatively absorbing you hate to put one aside until the end. There was one point he could have brought out in this one, though, which would have made the plot more realistic and believable. Barr discovers that the language the aquatic Venusians speak is similar to that of a dialect he once learned in a remote mountain section of Mexico and "the similarity opened astounding trails of speculation." And there Fennel leaves us. We don't find out, except through our own hazy speculation, hindered by the subsequent development of the plot, if the original Venusians once living in the jungles of Venus, actually were Aztec, Incan or Mayan colonists from Earth long ago. It was a flaw in an otherwise very enthralling and outstanding story. We'll forgive him this time. Evidently, you did!

LAND BEYOND THE FLAME was another excellent example of what may be done with a post-atomic war plot. Very good.

In fact, the only story that was not enjoyable was SKELETONS OF SPACE. It was well written, interesting, and undoubtedly Mrs. James McKimney, Jr., will again write in giving you her vote for loyalty. But, it was just too darn gruesome to rate very highly! There are some fans who eat that stuff up, though.

Burton K. Beerman's spoutings made me want to run up the hall after him—. But then, doddering oldsters of 14 or 15 can't be expected to enjoy the "inane spurtings" of Mittelbuscher. They are too taken up with their own mature burlings and an appreciation of their own intelligence. Quick, doc, Burtie's swallowed the dictionary!

Best letters this time: Paul Mittelbuscher, Don Wegars and John Fletcher.

Have you noticed lately that there is a plot afoot to wean fans away from their favorite literature, substituting (gaaaagg!) Westerns? ? ? Now who do you suppose it could be? Should we put the blame on the boys at the bindery? After all, they've been doing a good job for years with scarcely a complaint before. And you certainly can't expect a fan to put the blame on invading aliens who want to keep their presence a secret? !

But who, then, is responsible for this sudden rash of garbled mags, wherein a western story is subtly substituted for the most important center section of a sf mag? ? ? You aren't the only one hit, Jack. In the latest ish of STARTLING STORIES I notice a similar complaint from another disgusted reader. And several fen I write to have had the same unfortunate experience. So, who is responsible? ? ?

Maybe we should turn the facts and various suspects over to H. L. Gold to use in another editorial for *Galaxy*.

Tell Evelyn McLean she can come out of hiding and re-enter the rat race if she wishes, since Val Walker has insinuated himself right out of the picture. Maybe he's afraid someone will begin to question his intelligence and ability? It's a strange fact that only those who don't have any worry about it.

Joe Keogh: I didn't have to unpawn my typer to pounce with glee upon your condemnation of letters appearing on the back pages; luckily, it was already handy. But, when will you learn that people will not laugh at you for such a thing as your own letter subsequently appearing there, but *with* you? Stick around, boy, you live up the letter columns.

Welcome back, Uncle Bill, you cuddly li'l teddy bear with a crew cut. Now that you have come to grips with life (say, you never did tell us who won? ? ?) we now expect to see more of that "lightning wit." Your quotes. I liked TOPS IN SF too, if only for the pics. Speaking of pics, thank for at last jogging my memory over to the groove where it decides why this cover on the May PLANET seemed like I'd seen something similar before. It was on TOPS IN SF! That was indeed an illo.

Stfly,

CAROL MCKINNEY

ESCAPE ARTIST

2025 Franklin Avenue NE
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Dear Editor,

(Thank, by the way, for the prompt return of my short-short manuscript. You were right, of course. There was no plot. But I still like the idea. I may be able to give it a plot, but after five or six different approaches, I'm not too enthusiastic! Damn the plots! For me, writing is 1 per cent inspiration, 1 per cent perspiration, and 98 per cent going batty trying to figure out a plot.)

I'll take the VIZIGRAPH first . . . Carol McKinney, you're quite right. No need to defend stf to the unbelievers. It's impossible to justify the urge to read it to someone who doesn't have the same urge, anyway. That last sentence doesn't sound right. Oh well, let's just say that we read stf for escape and escape alone, because where can you find a more complete escape than in the misty, amber daylight of an alien jungle on a far-flung world, or in the deep starshot infinity of space. . . . Maybe we're crazy. That's a thought for you. Maybe we're all crazy. But if so, bring on the strait jacket, because I'll go very willingly.

I surmise that if you give Ron Ellik time enough, he's going to become a Bradbury fan. He sounds as tho he likes the red-eyed prophet pretty well. So do I. . . . So do I. Actually, the GOLDEN APPLES

yarn wasn't much of a story, but then, it isn't what Brad writes about, or what he says, or how he says it.

It's what he means and implies.

Calvin T. Beck provides an interesting letter. He has a rather snide, subtle wit, doesn't he? He sounds like a real old timer at this game. Probably is. I can't remember back more than two or three years.

Ditto Fred Christoff.

I vote: Carol McKinney, Keogh (for his comments of RB), and C. T. Beck. Very good reading.

To this rather haughty FEN, Miss Stamper, I say: Get with it gal. What's depressing about unorthodox abbreviations? In this crazy world of ours, called Fandom, a fan is a fan, a fen is a fen, and a BEM is a BEM. Science-fiction is "stf," and an illustration is an "illo." Hop on the wagon, Hazel, you can't buck time-honored traditions.

So much for La Viz. Now to the stories. A couple of them were good. THE MAN THE TECH MEN MADE was best. It read very well. Is Fox B. Holden really Gardner Fox, Ed? Or am I barking up the wrong dog again, as usual?

GRANDMA AND THE PIRATES was one of the most entertaining yarns I've read in ages. Different. . . . Very different.

THE TOY came next. Berry is easy to read and likable once you get used to having somebody else use Bradbury's style. He writes like RB, but of course, he doesn't think like RB. If he tried to think like him he would either (Number 1) go stark raving mad, or (Number 2) become the unaccepted imitation which, wrongly, many fen think he is already.

SWORD OF TORMAIN was the kind of down-right adventure that makes PLANET the leader of Space-opera mags. Very nice.

MORLEY'S WEAPON was also good. Not terrific, by my private standards, but good, at any rate.

The best of the shorts was the short-short short. Gad! After that line, my Underwood will never be the same.

Mr. McKimney, Jr. writes very well. I recall his WHERE THE GODS DECIDE a few issues back. He has a nice style and some very realistic ideas about mankind. I like him.

As for your current art work, Freas is wonderful. Keep him. He has the touch of Virgil Finlay, and yet he seems to have a style of his own.

I imagine this is about the limit, so I'll close up here, saying, as I've told you before, you, Mr. O'Sullivan, are doing a fine job with PLANET Stories. It has never been better.

MARVIN WILLIAMS

Ed's note: Re your query of Holden and Fox being one and the same . . . the answer is definitely no, I've met both gentlemen over the course of the years and there's little similarity between them except, of course, in their writing styles.

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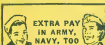
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